



Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte

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# **Spinoza on History, Christ, and Lights Untamable**

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“In my writing I do not always agree with what occurs, nor do I linger in the mud for the sheer sake of it. Also, it is curious that the people who rail against my work seem to overlook the sections of it which entail joy and love and hope, and there are such sections. My days, my years, my life has seen up and downs, lights and darkneses. If I wrote only and continually of the ‘light’ and never mentioned the other, then as an artist I would be a liar.”

Charles Bukowski, letter to Hans van den Broek, July 22, 1985

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## ABBREVIATIONS

### WORKS BY SPINOZA

- TIE        *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione; Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, in *Spinoza: Complete works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, Tr. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002).
- ST        *Korte Verhandeling van God, de Mensch en deszelvs Welstand; Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-being*, in *Spinoza: Complete works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, Tr. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002).
- TTP        *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus; Theological-Political Treatise*, Tr. Edwin Curley (unpublished manuscript).
- E        *Ethica; Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Vol. I*, ed. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- TP        *Tractatus Politicus; Political Treatise*, in *Spinoza: Complete works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, Tr. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002).
- Ep.        *Epistolae; The Letters*, in *Spinoza: Complete works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, Tr. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002).
- G        *Spinoza Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, 4 vols. (Hildesheim: Carl Winter Verlag, 1925).

I use Gebhardt's edition of Spinoza's works (G), and I quote from Samuel Shirley's translations, except for the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP) and the *Ethics* (E).

I use Edwin Curley's still unpublished translation of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, which he has generously shared with many academics and students. References to the TTP include chapter, paragraph, and the volume/page numbers from the Gebhardt edition, which Curley includes in his translations. I also use Curley's translation of the *Ethics*, again using the Gebhardt volume and page numbers where necessary. Passages in the *Ethics* will be referred to by means of the following abbreviations: a(-xiom), c(-orollary), p(-roposition), s(-cholium), app(-endix), def(-



inition), and dem(-onstration). Hence, EIIdf2 is the second definition of part 2 and EIHp43dem is the demonstration of proposition 43 of part 3.

References to Shirley's translation of Spinoza's correspondence (Ep.) are to letter and page number. References to the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TIE) are to paragraph number and page number. References to the *Short Treatise* (ST) are to part, chapter, and page number. References to the *Political Treatise* (TP) are to chapter, paragraph, and page number as found in Shirley.

## OTHER WORKS

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| Guide      | Maimonides, Moses. <i>The Guide of the Perplexed</i> [1197], Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Schlomo Pines, with an Introductory Essay by Leo Strauss (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963).  |
| Discourses | Machiavelli, Niccolo. <i>Discourses on Livy</i> [ca. 1517]. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).  |
| Adv.       | Bacon, Francis. <i>The Advancement of Learning</i> [1605], in <i>Francis Bacon: The Major Works</i> , ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).   |
| NO         | Bacon, Francis. <i>Novum Organum</i> [1620], in <i>The Oxford Francis Bacon: The Instauratio Magna Part II: Novum Organum and Associated Texts. Vol. XI</i> , eds. Graham Rees and Maria Wakely (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).   |
| DA         | Bacon, Francis. <i>De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum</i> [1623], in <i>The Works of Francis Bacon</i> , eds. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Devon Heath (London: Longmans Green, 1879).  |
| Mysteries  | Ames, William. <i>The Mysteries of the Kingdom of God</i> [1661], in 'Spiritualism and Rationalism in Dutch Collegiant Thought', Tr. Jo Van Cauter, <i>Lias</i> 40 (2013): 105-175. Original Dutch title: De Verborgentheden van het Rijkke Godts, ende de werckinge leydinge en bestieringe van Godts Geest verklaert in tegenstelling van de letterlijcke oeffeningen voorgesteld als de ware Godtsdienst door Galenus Abrahamsz ende door zijn aenhangers ende toestemmers gelooft. |

## INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this dissertation is to provide an assessment of piety, religious prophecy and morality more generally in Spinoza's thought through a careful examination of themes and topics that have remained controversial, or at least underexplored, in Spinoza studies. Specifically, it discusses how Spinoza's Christology provides a unique angle for approaching his moral and theological-political thinking, and incorporates a study of neglected 'English' influences and debates. Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* forms the backbone of this study, supplemented by his other works when relevant. The dissertation can be roughly divided into two parts. As detailed below, the first part consisting of Chapters 1-3, deals with Spinoza's English connection: it introduces Baconianism and Quakerism as appropriate starting points for an inquiry into his understanding of the (provisional) morality of the philosopher, biblical hermeneutics, and the ethical conduct of the faithful. The second part, which consists of Chapters 4-8, turns to Spinoza's treatment of the figure of Christ.

Spinoza's reflections in the *Theological-Political Treatise* are increasingly recognized as holding a position of central importance in early modern thought, and in recent years they have been the focus of a rich and growing body of scholarship. Numerous studies have demonstrated a willingness to confront the persistent image of Spinoza as an awe-inspiring system-builder and 'pure' philosopher whose main or sole concern was to develop an all-encompassing view of Nature and man *sub specie aeternitatis*.<sup>1</sup> While it remains largely undisputed that for Spinoza true understanding always is understanding from the view-point of eternity, the seemingly contingent nature of historical events as viewed *sub specie durationis* has more than ever been deemed essential to an adequate understanding of his overall program. Not only does Spinoza always project his philosophical ideal within the limits imposed by natural-historical conditions, the overall orientation of his body of work suggests the hand of an author deeply attuned to the social and

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (1997) and Bagley, *Philosophy, Theology, and Politics* (2008).

political realities of life which so often shape human existence. Far from being untroubled by historical contingency and the vagaries of everyday life, Spinoza was an author passionately concerned with the mundane and practical.<sup>2</sup>

Through the years, commentators have challenged the tendency, especially in Anglophone philosophy, to treat Spinoza's political and religious writings merely as an intermezzo in, or appendix to, the grand metaphysical and epistemological scheme developed throughout his writings. In the political treatises Spinoza gives voice to ideas integral to his philosophical thought.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Spinoza did not derive his understanding of morality, religion, and politics merely from the timeless principles and definitions presented in the *Ethics*. Far from being the legendary recluse, he developed his thought through an active engagement with other thinkers (past and present), the turbulent Dutch society, and the various intellectual milieus and movements among which he lived and worked. Renewed interest in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and *Political Treatise* has not only revealed the extent to which Spinoza's work incorporated, reacted to, and aggravated the philosophical, theological, and political controversies debated at that time, some have even deemed his particular stance towards mankind's 'socio-political predicament' universally relevant. Various schools of political thought in the late twentieth century made Spinoza the nucleus of their contemporary projects<sup>4</sup>, while others attributed to Spinoza and Spinozism a majestic role in the development of the so-called 'radical

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (1988), Kisner, *Spinoza on Human Freedom: Reason, Autonomy and the Good Life* (2011) and Lord (ed.), *Spinoza Beyond Philosophy* (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Studies that have taken the TTP as focal point of research include Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (1997); Nadler, *A book forged in hell* (2001); Verbeek, *Spinoza's Theologico-political Treatise: Exploring 'the Will of God'* (2003); Bagley, *Philosophy, Theology, and Politics* (2008); Melamed and Rosenthal (eds), *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide* (2010); James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise* (2012); Douglas, *Spinoza & Dutch Cartesianism: Philosophy and Theology* (2015). Commentaries centered on the TP (and Spinoza's politics more generally) include Matheron, *Anthropologie et politique au 17e* (1986); Negri, *The Savage Anomaly* (1991); Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics* (1998).

<sup>4</sup> For Marxist approaches, see Althusser, *Essays in Self-Criticism* (1973), Negri, *Ibid.*, Montag, *The New Spinoza* and Balibar, *Ibid.* For liberal approaches, see Den Uyl, *Power, State and Freedom: An Interpretation of Spinoza's Political Philosophy*, Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (1987) and Smith, *Ibid.* For feminist interpretations, see Gatens (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza* (2009).

Enlightenment’.<sup>5</sup>

However, whereas most commentators would now agree that Spinoza deserves a rightful place in the canon of political thought, his *Theological-Political Treatise* is rarely deemed essential to an understanding of his general philosophical project. That is, the *Treatise* is commonly regarded as being at best only a kind of boiled down, non-philosophical rendition of the complete philosophical teaching presented in the *Ethics*.<sup>6</sup> Correspondingly, as Duffy notes, studies oriented towards the TTP have predominantly investigated the TTP in itself, independently of its relation to the *Ethics*, and have concentrated either on (a) the historical and textual background of the text, (b) its particular intervention in the religious and political debates of the time, or (c) its value for a proper assessment of the place of the imagination, prophecy, and the specific role of religion in Spinoza’s thought (‘Spinoza today: the current state of Spinoza scholarship’, 113).

There are good reasons for adopting a contextualist approach to the study of the TTP. As Spinoza himself indicates in the *Treatise*, the primary goal of any earnest interpreter is to discover what a work means, and this – for Spinoza, at least – is to ascertain what particular message the author wants to express through his or her particular intervention. The discovery of the intended meaning of any literary work is to be sought through a linguistic analysis of the text, accompanied by an inquiry into the historical, political, and religious context of its composition, the beliefs and aims of its author and the nature of its intended audience.<sup>7</sup> If we are to appreciate the richness and complexity of Spinoza’s views in the *Treatise*, we cannot but assess the text within the context

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<sup>5</sup> See Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment* (1981) and Israel’s *Radical Enlightenment* (2001), *Enlightenment Contested* (2006), and *Democratic Enlightenment* (2011). For a more nuanced view, see Van Bunge, *De Nederlandse Republiek, Spinoza en de radicale verlichting* (2010).

<sup>6</sup> This is remarked, for instance, in Bagley, *Philosophy, Theology, and Politics*, 8 and Melamed, ‘The metaphysics of the *Theological-Political Treatise*’, 128.

<sup>7</sup> To be clear, Spinoza makes these methodological comments in specific relation to Scripture (e.g. TTP 7.13-17; GIII 100). However, as Nadler rightly points out, for Spinoza, the same considerations undoubtedly apply to all works of human literature (‘Scripture and Truth: A Problem in Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*’, 633). Indeed, only insofar as texts provide either (Euclidean-style) definitions of the things of which they speak, or can be heard and understood “without wonder”, Spinoza tells us, do the above mentioned considerations lose some of their importance (see TTP 7.66-68; GIII 111). As philosophers debating the meaning and import of the TTP we can surmise that the *Treatise* does not satisfy either conditions.

of its own particular setting. And given the wide array of interrelated arguments and polemics that organize the TTP, contextualist approaches have been vital to making the text more accessible to today's reader.<sup>8</sup>

Still, some scholars have recently argued that Spinoza's *Treatise* also gives us valuable hints for understanding his general philosophical program. Although we should keep in mind the distinctive aims and audiences of each work, Spinoza's commitments in the TTP dovetail closely with those of the *Ethics*.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, despite obvious differences in their respective approaches, both works are essentially concerned with knowledge, affects, politics, and salvation. Furthermore, as Spinoza notes in the *Treatise*, books have fates in the hands of readers.<sup>10</sup> This has the implication not only that we should be careful not be preoccupied with our own reasoning while looking for the meaning of a literary work, but also that texts require interpretation to come to life and transcend the mere written word upon paper. We should, therefore, not hesitate to apply Spinoza's analysis of biblical and literary works to his own writings: they too need to be taken up

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<sup>8</sup> Commentators have studied the TTP from a variety of perspectives (though the following list is far from exhaustive). Some have approached the text from a Jewish point of view (e.g. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (1997); see also Ravven and Goodman, *Jewish Themes in Spinoza's Philosophy* (2002) and the thematic volume of *Studia Spinozana* entitled *Spinoza and Jewish Identity* (1997)). Others have situated the text primarily within a Dutch intellectual context (e.g. Klever, *Mannen rond Spinoza* (1997); Van Bunge, 'Spinoza's Jewish Identity and the Use of Context' (1997), 100-118; Nadler, *A book forged in hell* (2001); Van Bunge, *Spinoza Past and Present* (2012)). Still others have looked at the *Treatise* within the particular context of Dutch Cartesianism (Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority* (2001); Nyden-Bullock, *Spinoza's Radical Cartesian Mind* (2007); Douglas, *Spinoza and Dutch Cartesianism* (2015)), Dutch Calvinist Orthodoxy (James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics* (2012)), and Dutch radical Protestantism (Hunter, *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought* (2015)). Verbeek in turn has presented a mainly Hobbesian reading of the *Treatise* (*Spinoza's Theologico-Political Treatise: Exploring 'the Will of God'* (2013)). Finally, there are those who have examined the textual history of the TTP (e.g. Akkerman and Steenbakkers (eds.), *Spinoza to the Letter: Studies in Words, Texts and Books* (2005) and Steenbakkers, 'The text of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*' (2010). I have benefited enormously from the work of all of these scholars.

<sup>9</sup> I am thinking in particular of Susan James' work on the subject. She argues that Spinoza's redefined version of revealed religion presented in the TTP – in addition to being a socially useful strategy for the maintenance of public order – ultimately is meant to make religion more hospitable to philosophy. This is achieved by fostering in the individual epistemic virtues such as openness and sincerity, against hypocrisy and stubbornness. In her elegant reading of the *Treatise*, Spinoza not only advocates the flourishing of religious piety, philosophy itself becomes a form of religion, sharing the capacity to unite, and transform superstitious devotion into rational piety. See her 'Spinoza and Superstition: Coming to Terms With Fear', 'Democracy and the good life in Spinoza's philosophy' and *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics* (2012). This renewed interest in demonstrating the mutual relation of the *Treatise* with Spinoza's *Ethics* can also be found in Melamed and Rosenthal (eds.), *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide* (2010).

<sup>10</sup> E.g. TTP 9.32; GIII 135.

by a reader in order for them to be able to disclose their full meaning, let alone become a source of embodied truth.

This dissertation calls attention to the richness of the *TTP* in terms of both its historical context and its philosophical contribution to Spinoza's general project. That is, it combines contextual analysis of the *TTP* with systematic interpretation intended to demonstrate, or at least highlight, the mutual relation of the *Treatise* with Spinoza's other writings, most notably the *Ethics*.

## DISSERTATION OUTLINE

Chapter 1 argues that practical and imaginary techniques form an integral part of a life dedicated to the cultivation of reason as portrayed by Spinoza. By examining Spinoza's letter to Bouwmeester of 10 June 1666, it will be argued that Spinoza referred to and made use of *Baconian* civil history as a repository of behavioral knowledge useful for everyday practices and considerations. Specifically, I show that civil history forms an integral part of Spinoza's reflections on provisional morality. Spinoza, following Bacon, holds that conduct of practical affairs is particularly improved when those so engaged acquire historical knowledge of the human condition and apply it. Both authors place special emphasis on a history of men's characters, actions, and vices as providing the material basis for concrete, directly applicable moral and civil precepts.

As important as Bacon was for Spinoza's appropriation of a provisional ethics, he was probably even more significant for his purposes of developing a historical-critical investigation of the Bible. Spinoza's debt to the inductive method of Bacon in his efforts to ascertain the meaning of Scripture in the *TTP* has often been remarked,<sup>11</sup> but seldom thoroughly examined. Chapter 2 hopes to fill this lacuna to a great extent. Beginning with the straightforward observation that Spinoza's prescription for interpreting the Bible corresponds to the general methodology of Baconian natural science, it goes on to show that Spinoza's application of the Baconian *ars*

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<sup>11</sup> E.g. Zac, *Spinoza et l'interprétation de l'Écriture* 29-36; Donagan, *Spinoza*, 16-7; Gabbey, 'Spinoza's natural science and methodology', 170; Preuss, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*, 161-7.

*historica* to Scripture provides the framework from which to approach some of the most bewildering questions that arise in the context of Spinoza's views on biblical hermeneutics. Specifically, I argue that both Spinoza's radical rejection in the *Treatise* of all appeals to supernatural inspiration, and his conspicuous revision of biblical miracles – as having natural rather than supernatural causal explanations – are best understood in light of Bacon's discussion of ancient historical texts and the difficulties related to their transmission and interpretation. I show that by integrating Scripture within the canon of civil history – extending Bacon's reflections regarding the biased transmission of knowledge to Scripture itself – Spinoza in the TTP can be read as taking Bacon's claim for the universal application of the natural-historical method to its logical conclusion.

Chapter 3 applies Spinoza's analysis of Scripture and biblical piety to the religious beliefs of the early Quakers. Like the reception of Bacon's work in the United Provinces of the seventeenth century, the impact of Quakerism on Dutch intellectual life remains relatively unexamined and underappreciated. Although partially motivated by uncertainty concerning the available historical data, this lack of attention, from a Spinozist point of view, is unfortunate and unwarranted. Not only would the early Quaker movement expose Dutch society and young Spinoza to some of the most ground-breaking religious ideas of that moment – some of which would resurface in Spinoza's mature thought – their enthusiasm in spreading the Word made (and makes) them ideal candidates for a theological-political assessment of a 'radical' Christianity in practice. Specifically, I argue that an examination of Spinoza's concept of piety and religious prophecy in light of the early Quaker phenomenon is particularly useful in bringing attention to the Spinozistic distinction between a *philosophical* and *theologico-political* assessment of divine revelation. In the context of biblical religion, Spinoza tells us, individuals are never culpable for the alleged irrationality of their convictions; the proof of faith lies entirely in one's commitment to the practice of justice and charity. Put differently, Spinoza himself was ever fully aware that a metaphysical rejection of providence, anthropomorphism, and teleological thinking should never

be invoked against inner appeals to revelation and inspiration made by religious individuals. Whatever enthusiastic claims are made, individuals should only be restrained insofar as their opinions give rise to practices that endanger or undermine socio-political stability. An examination of the early Quaker phenomenon is particularly useful in bringing this crucial feature of Spinozism to attention.

The following chapters are devoted to Spinoza's discussion of Christ. Spinoza's treatment of the figure of Christ remains one of the most perplexing and controversial issues in Spinoza studies. His remarkably positive remarks about Christ are taken by some as a confirmation of Spinoza's preference for Christian universalism over Jewish particularism (e.g. Hunter, *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought*), whereas others have interpreted them mainly in terms of a (cunning or careful) rhetorical strategy vis-a-vis his Christian audience (E.g. Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*; Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity*). As will become apparent, both readings face serious challenges. At any rate, whatever approach one ends up taking, and there are many, a proper analysis of the issue requires that we take into account Spinoza's distinction between Christ 'according to the spirit' and Christ 'according to the flesh'.

We begin in Chapter 4 with an analysis of 'the spirit of Christ.' I argue that Spinoza identifies the spirit of Christ with, foremost, a desire for just and charitable behavior; an inclination towards brotherly love found in men of all religious and non-religious denominations. The spirit of Christ manifests itself in: (a) those who act justly out of intellectual enlightenment, (b) those who through biblical faith are inspired towards justice and charity, and (c) those 'Turks and other Gentiles' who are moved by their books to loving-kindness. I show that Spinoza's divergent use of this concept can be explained in reference to the plurality of 'knowledges of good and evil' capable of inciting in men this desire for justice and charity. For Spinoza, both 'true knowledge of good and evil' (manifested by the striving towards the ideal of the Spinozistic free man) and 'purported knowledge of good and evil' (manifested in case of Judeo-Christian religion by the striving towards the ideal of God as lawgiver) have the capacity of leading people towards



the spiritual Christ. I show that apart from the Bible, other narratives (and the exemplars they contain) also potentially qualify as pedagogical tools capable of inciting in men a desire for justice and charity. What ties together the ethical endeavors of all those devoting themselves to justice and loving-kindness – allowing Spinoza to subsume them under one comprehensive category – is not the content of their knowledge, but a mutual reliance on action-guiding exemplars and, importantly, a shared commitment in overcoming the various stumbling-blocks that daily obstruct its realization.

Chapters 5-8 deal with Spinoza's treatment of Jesus or Christ 'according to the flesh'. The main argument developed throughout these chapters is that Spinoza's Jesus presents himself as Spinoza's version of the philosopher-prophet. In order to lead both philosophers and non-philosophers to the perfection and salvation available to them, Spinoza's Jesus develops a two-fold method of teaching adjusted to the intellectual abilities and affective sensibilities of his audience: when confronted with an uneducated and stubborn multitude he teaches his revelations obscurely through parables; yet speaking to those who are capable of knowing 'the mysteries of the heavens' he teaches in terms of eternal truths. I argue that it is this holistic perspective of Christ – i.e. his role as both philosophical instructor and prophetic teacher – that uniquely qualifies him as Spinoza's version of the philosopher-prophet. Each chapter in turn examines various implications of this reading.

Chapter 5 argues that Spinoza's depiction of Christ as philosopher-prophet is meant to highlight the profoundly instrumental nature of revealed religion as portrayed in the TTP. Instead of presenting the non-philosophical multitude with eternal truths that would not be understood, Spinoza's Jesus chose an alternative method of teaching that would be successful in encouraging justice and loving-kindness. That is, Spinoza's Christ, a moral teacher who transcended the vulgar conception of the deity, embraces the anthropomorphic image of God due to its motivational efficacy in bringing about obedience. The Christ of the TTP therefore presents himself as a consequentialist who not only tailors his message to his specific audience but ultimately presents

them philosophically contradictory teachings. For Spinoza's Jesus, the philosophical inadequacy of the anthropomorphic image of God is secondary to the positive moral effect it generates.

Chapter 6 shows that Christ's *modus operandi* towards the multitude accords perfectly with Spinoza's conception of religious prophecy set forward in the TTP. For Spinoza, obedience is the primary objective of Scripture, not truth. The vocation of the prophet was to promote a lifestyle that takes God as an example, a lifestyle devoted to loving-kindness and justice. By relying on the image of God as lawgiver Spinoza's Jesus could successfully accomplish this goal. Spinoza's Christ presents people with philosophically unsound though salutary tenets of faith, and therefore should be considered a faithful messenger of God. For Spinoza, Christ is no false prophet nor an impostor; the recourse to measures that relate primarily to the passions and imaginings of people is an essential part of the prophetic model he uses.

Chapter 7 considers whether the model of Christ as philosopher-prophet can be maintained given Spinoza's critique of Maimonides in the TTP. I argue that Spinoza's Christ should not be mistaken for a *Maimonidean* philosopher-prophet: his teachings towards the masses are not derived from reason via a translation of philosophical insight into imaginative language. Building on the argument of the preceding chapters it is argued that Spinoza's Jesus instructs non-philosophers by means of parables and imaginative language mainly due to their effectiveness in leading people towards justice and charity.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I discuss the political ramifications of Spinoza's portrayal of Christ as philosopher-prophet. I argue that Spinoza identifies Christ's reliance on both reason and imagination to instill religious adherence as the cause of the fragmentation and disunity that has characterized theology since its earliest dispersion. Although Spinoza at first sight puts forward Christianity's universal nature as the cause of the superstitious obfuscation of theology and philosophical reasoning by the Apostles, a careful reading shows that, in fact, Christ is the central figure in this issue. Whereas Spinoza's Jesus was careful enough not to rely on philosophical arguments while addressing the multitude, he did not demand the same level of scrutiny from his

Apostles. Christ's followers (like Jesus himself) not only fell back on highly charged imaginative language, they increasingly relied on speculative reasoning while addressing the multitude. I argue that Spinoza, by making the Christ of the TTP both sanctioner and exemplar for the way the Apostles spread their religious doctrine, situates the roots of Christianity's decay into superstitious discourse already within Christ's own teaching. For this reason, this chapter argues that the identification of the biblical Jesus of the TTP with a philosopher-prophet renders Spinoza's critique of the political deficiency of the teachings of the Apostles, and their descendants, fully intelligible.

## CHAPTER 1: WISDOM AS A MEDITATION ON LIFE: SPINOZA ON BACON AND CIVIL HISTORY

This chapter argues that Baconian civil history forms an integral – yet overlooked – part of Spinoza's reflections on provisional morality. As is well known, Spinoza in the *Ethics* identifies the realization of intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*) with the accompanying ‘greatest satisfaction of mind’ (*summa acquiescentia*) and ‘intellectual love of God’ (*amor dei intellectualis*) as man's highest good. Spinoza, however, is aware that life does not await our philosophical deliberations. While we pursue this end, he tells us, “we have to continue with our lives” (TIE §17, 6). Spinoza, for this reason, elaborates on the importance of deciding on certain manners and rules of living which, without compromising the philosophical project, help guide our everyday action. This chapter contends that it is in the realm of provisional morality that Baconian civil history comes into play. It argues that for Spinoza, an investigation of the mind's “perturbations and distempers” – the very subject matter of good Baconian civil history – is a crucial requisite for everyday moral philosophy. Spinoza, following Bacon, singles out civil history as the branch of learning particularly capable of providing men with a body of behavioural knowledge, that is, knowledge of the various characters, deeds and vices of men; knowledge particularly useful for everyday practices and considerations.

Scholars have identified the presence of a provisional or interim morality as an integral part of Spinoza's ethical project (Matheron, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*, 540f; Zweerman, *L'introduction à la philosophie selon Spinoza*, Ch. X; De Dijn, *Spinoza*, 39-40, ‘Ethics IV: The Ladder, Not the ‘Top’, ‘Ethics as Medicine for the Mind’). Spinoza's reflections on what can be called end-state morality – i.e. the realization of *scientia intuitiva* and its accompanying affectional states – are preceded by discussions of various rules that living philosophers need to implement in everyday life. In the TIE, Spinoza enumerates three rules of living (*vivendi regulæ*) that help guide our daily deliberations with regard to (a) our contact with others in civil society, (b) sensual pleasures, and (c) the attainment of wealth and other mundane goods necessary for sustaining life

and health (TIE §17, 6). Philosophers, after all, remain people. Prior to embarking on their philosophical endeavor, they need to acquire a certain *modus vivendi* regarding others and temporal goods.

The *Ethics* too emphasizes the importance of deciding on certain “right principles of living” (*recta vivendi ratio*) intended to facilitate the more arduous task of achieving intellectual love of God. According to Spinoza, we need to commit to memory a number of maxims – for instance that “hate is to be conquered by love” – and apply them constantly to the particular cases frequently encountered in everyday life (EVp10s). The basic idea behind these maxims is training our imagination in order for it not to be affected so easily by unstable feelings of, for example, hope, fear, and anger. By constantly reflecting on such principles and applying them to daily life, we raise awareness of how one should adequately respond to emotionally upsetting situations.

De Dijn (‘Ethics as Medicine for the Mind’, 266–7), following Matheron (*Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*, 540f), describes the provisional morality of the *Ethics* as responding to a way of life in which the power of reason “has not yet been consolidated or developed into a regime of full freedom” (see Zweerman, *L'introduction à la philosophie selon Spinoza*) for a similar view on the provisional morality of the TIE). What matters here is that the realization of (1) a cautious and fruitful comportment towards others in society as well as (2) a successful application of the maxims of life discussed in EVp10s requires knowledge of the various characters, deeds, and vices of men. The more we acquaint ourselves with the human condition, the less we will be demobilized by emotionally upsetting situations arising from our interactions with others. This chapter argues that the behavioral knowledge envisioned by Spinoza useful in everyday life above all is to be gained from studying and reading civil history. Although for Spinoza philosophical *beatitudo* ultimately demands understanding affects through their first causes – i.e. the intuitive perception of things *sub specie aeternitatis* – the realm of everyday (provisional) morality allows for a different, more pragmatic approach. I argue that a philosophical understanding of the mind and

its affections is not needed at this stage. Spinoza, following Bacon, holds that conduct of practical affairs is already improved when those so engaged acquire *historical* knowledge of the human condition and apply it. Civil history is particularly useful for providing men with a vivid and realistic depiction of the human condition, and hence a vital aid for everyday moral philosophy. While Bacon was not the first to identify the importance of history as an educational tool, Spinoza embraces Bacon's historical approach as the one most suitable for illuminating his own. As we shall see, this was motivated, in part, by the existing familiarity of Spinoza's audience with the Baconian system.

This chapter comprises four sections. Section 1.1 offers a reevaluation of Spinoza's letter to Bouwmeester. In letter 37, Spinoza identifies a *historiola mentis* à la Bacon as providing crucial knowledge for distinguishing more easily between the various perceptions human beings form. I argue that Spinoza should be read as referring to Baconian civil history as providing material for contemplating more easily the variety and complexity of human passionate behavior. Section 1.2 examines Bacon's own project of using and devising civil histories for moral and civil instruction. In Section 1.3, I show that Spinoza's letter to Bouwmeester incorporates Bacon's call for a historically informed study of human dispositions and life-styles, and reveal how this corresponds to Spinoza's reflections on the importance of knowledge of “the deeds of men” as presented in the TTP and *Ethics*. Finally, in Section 1.4, I address two objections to my thesis.

## 1.1 SPINOZA'S LETTER TO BOUWMEESTER

In a letter dated 10 June 1666, Spinoza was asked by his friend Johannes Bouwmeester whether “there is or can be a method such that thereby we can make sure and unwearied progress in the study of things of the highest importance”, or whether “our thoughts are governed more by fortune than by skill” (Ep. 37, 861). Spinoza replied that our adequate ideas are not caused by anything outside ourselves, but only by other adequate ideas. Our clear and distinct perceptions

“depend only on our nature and its definite and fixed laws, that is, on our power itself alone, and not on chance”. Inadequate ideas, on the other hand, depend on causes foreign to our nature and power. The true method, for this reason, consists solely “in the knowledge of pure intellect and its nature and laws” (ibid.). That is, the true method is nothing but a reflection on the intellect's “inborn power” to produce adequate ideas, uncaused by external causes. It is a reflection on what it means to *have* adequate ideas, or as Spinoza puts it, it is “nothing but reflexive knowledge ... which shows how the mind is to be directed according to the standard of a given true idea” (TIE §38, 11). In sum, the true method is discovered by having adequate ideas, and reflexively studying their nature, properties, and the manner in which they relate to and arise from other adequate ideas (De Dijn, *Spinoza*, 77; Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, 84). Importantly, method should be distinguished from the act of reasoning itself: “method must necessarily be discourse about reasoning or intellection. That is, method is not reasoning itself which leads to the understanding of the causes of thing., and far less is it the understanding of the causes of things” (TIE §37, 11).

Spinoza proceeds to identify three tasks that will enable us to develop this kind of reflexive cognition:

We must first of all distinguish between intellect and imagination, that is, between true ideas and the others -fictitious, false, doubtful, and, in sum, all ideas which depend only on memory. To understand these things, at least as far as the method requires, there is no need to get to know the nature of mind through its first cause; it is enough to formulate a brief account of the mind or its perceptions [*historiola mentis*] in the manner expounded by Verulam [*quo Verulamius docet*]. I think that in these few words I have explained and demonstrated the true method, and at the same time shown the way to attain it. It remains, however, for me to advise you that for all this there is needed constant meditation and a most steadfast mind and purpose, to acquire which it is most important to establish a fixed way and manner of life, and to have a definite aim in view. (Ep. 37, 861; emphasis mine)

According to Spinoza, we should (1) distinguish between adequate and inadequate ideas, that is, between intellect and imagination, (2) compile a history of the mind and its ideas – *historiola mentis* – in the manner pioneered by Bacon to facilitate the first task and (3) settle on a suitable way of life according to a fixed plan.

Spinoza's guidelines can be read as a succinct implementation of his thoughts on method developed more fully in the TIE (De Dijn, *Spinoza*, 39; Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, 79; Schneider, 'Spinoza's Epistemological Methodism'). De Dijn relates point (3) to Spinoza's discussion on the importance of a provisional morality found in §17 of the TIE, whereas point (2) is said to refer to Spinoza's enumeration of the various modes of perceiving found in §18 of the TIE (ibid., 39, 50). On this reading, Spinoza's reference to a Baconian 'historiola mentis' alludes to the need of creating a general survey of the various ideas human beings form. That is, in the terminology of the *Ethics* (see EIIp40s2), distinguishing between (1) imaginative knowledge from singular things and signs, (2) common notions and adequate ideas of properties of things, and (3) intuitive knowledge.

A closer look at Spinoza's letter to Bouwmeester reveals, however, a more profound appeal to the Baconian project than has hitherto been recognized. In what follows, I argue that Spinoza's reference to a *historiola mentis* should not be read simply as a reference to a general taxonomy of ideas, but more specifically to a Baconian history of the human mind that includes vivid descriptions of the various and distinct passions people exhibit.

Let me begin by addressing two questions that provoke a more thorough analysis of the passage under consideration. First, Spinoza presents the construction of a *historiola mentis* as a tool for distinguishing more easily between "true ideas and the others – fictitious, false, doubtful, and, in sum, all ideas which depend only on memory". If by *historiola mentis* Spinoza is merely referring to a general division between ideas (into three, or in case of the TIE, four kinds of knowledge), then it remains unclear what the added value of such a survey would be. Spinoza's appeal to a Baconian 'historiola mentis' suggests that such a history can make the distinction between ideas



more apparent by providing additional information on how these differences manifest themselves.

Second, if Spinoza is simply referring to a general division between the various kinds of knowledge, then why did he feel the need to relate specifically to Bacon? By the time Spinoza wrote the letter to Bouwmeester, he had already written the major part of the *Ethics*, material that for the most part already was accessible to Bouwmeester (Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, 79). If Spinoza only wanted to direct attention to the general distinction between kinds of knowledge, it would have made more sense for him to simply relate to his own writings. Spinoza singles out Bacon as the proponent of a historical-taxonomic way of thinking that is considered essential for an understanding of the various kinds of ideas; an approach that does not require us to know the mind through its first cause (Ep. 37, 861) yet still is particularly effective in instructing people. The question, therefore, emerges as to what specific Baconian outlook Spinoza is referring to?

Each of these questions can be answered by interpreting Spinoza's 'historiola mentis' as referring to Baconian-style depictions of human passions, or put differently, to a collection of empirical data about human behavior gathered from and present within civil history and its multiple sources (Bacon's particular definition of civil history will be discussed in Section 2). Spinoza's advice to Bouwmeester is to take into account Baconian-style 'Civil History' as providing instructive material for contemplating more easily the variety, complexity, and persistence of human passionate behavior.

The step from a 'small' history of the mind à la Bacon to a full-blooded defense of Baconian civil history requires justification. Indeed, why would Baconian civil history help specifically with Bouwmeester's worry to distinguish more easily between the various perceptions? The following considerations will help answer this question.

First, in the letter to Bouwmeester, Spinoza reformulates the important Baconian claim that in order for us to orient ourselves in a legitimate direction, acquaintance with the limits of human cognition or – to use Corneanu's expression – with man's "epistemic intemperance"

(*Regimens of the Mind*, 43) is needed. As is well known, Bacon's theory of the idols relates directly to this propensity of the mind to distortion. Indeed, Corneanu defines the first general sense of the Baconian 'idols' as "that of erroneous notions, opinions, or doctrines, to which are attached observations about the mental processes responsible for them" (ibid., 21). Arguably, Bacon's theory of the idols presents us with a 'brief' history of the mind's propensity to distortion.

Second, for Bacon, the inquiry into one's epistemic processes – the identification of the roots of cognitive error – has an essential moral or mental-medicinal aspect. Acquainting ourselves with the ill functioning of the human mind and the various processes involved itself forms an integral part of the "remedy" or "purging of the mind" (Corneanu and Vermeir, 'Idols of the Imagination', 184). For Bacon, a consideration of the idols has remedial virtues by itself (Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind*, 73). Spinoza agrees. Method not only demands reflexive knowledge of the intellect's power to produce other adequate ideas, it also implies a proper understanding of the workings of the passions (of the *prejudices* of the mind in the terminology of the *Ethics*). Bouwmeester, Spinoza suggests, must acquire the continuous habit of distinguishing between intellect *and* imagination. However, and this is crucial, insight into the workings of the imagination can be attained in a way that does not require us to know the mind through its first cause.

For Bacon (third), the source of *data* for the improvement of both morality – i.e. the 'Philosophy of Humanity' which considers man 'segregate' – and policy – i.e. 'Civil Philosophy' which considers man 'congregate and in society' – is civil history (Wormald, *Francis Bacon*, 77; Manzo, 'Francis Bacon's Natural History and Civil History', 37). Although civil history does not offer a strict metaphysical account of the affects and the processes involved, the knowledge contained in it still provides a vivid and captivating observation to the state of the human condition. Bacon writes that "men taste well knowledges that are drenched in flesh and blood, civil history, morality, policy, about which men's affections, praises, fortunes do turn and are conversant" (Works III, 383). Specifically, for Bacon, civil history harbors an inexhaustible wealth

of information regarding the “characters, affections, and perturbations” of the human mind. He singles out a wiser sort of historians, poets, and prophets as supreme doctors of this knowledge; they captivate the intricate workings of the mind and reveal the way in which passionate processes manifests themselves through space and time. In sum, for Bacon, an acquaintance with civil history is particularly useful since it reveals – in an especially captivating manner – the persistency and diversity of human passionate behavior.

To further substantiate my thesis, I briefly discuss Bacon's project of using and devising civil histories for moral instruction within the larger framework of the *De Augmentis* (Section 2). Subsequently, I draw attention to Bacon's discussion of the ‘doctrine concerning Negotiation’ found in Chapter 2 of Book 8 of *De Augmentis* (Section 3). These surveys will guide us towards a better understanding of Spinoza's own use of civil history in his philosophy.

## 1.2 BACON ON THE KNOWLEDGE OF ‘THE DIFFERENT CHARACTERS OF NATURES AND DISPOSITIONS’

Historical knowledge of seventeenth-century Holland allows us to determine the relative accessibility of Bacon's works in this time period. Although it remains difficult to establish the precise extent to which Bacon's work was known, “the steady flow of Baconiana from the Dutch printing presses from 1633 onwards, most of the time in Latin and occasionally only in Dutch, shows that Bacon's works were much in demand in learned circles” (Verbeek, ‘Dutch Philosophy Between Bacon and Descartes’, 6). Over the course of the century no less than forty-five printings of his works were published, indicating the successful diffusion of Baconian ideas in the Dutch Republic (Dibon, ‘Sur la reception de l'oeuvre de F. Bacon en Hollande dans la première moitié du XVIIe siècle’, 91–115). Editions of *Sapientia Veterum*, *New Atlantis*, *Novum Organum*, *Sylva Sylvarum*, Bacon's *Essays* and *De Augmentis Scientiarum* circulated, and in 1653 a collection of posthumous works was composed by the Amsterdam Elsevier brothers (Verbeek, ‘Dutch Philosophy Between Bacon and Descartes’, 6; for a full list of editions, see Gibson, *Francis Bacon*).

Spinoza's familiarity with Bacon went beyond the latter's purely scientific writings. Spinoza, we can be sure, not only had access to the *Novum Organum*, his library contained a copy of *Sermones Fideles, Ethici, Politici, aconomici: Sive Interiora Rerum. Accedit Faber Fortunae &c.*, a 1641 Latin Edition of Bacon's *Essays* (1625). This edition included material from Book VIII of *De Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623): Chapter 2 ('Consilia quaedam de Negotiis ex Parabolis aliquibus Salomonis' & 'Faber Fortuna sive doctrina de ambitu vita') and parts of Chapter 3 (viz. 'de Certitudine Legum per Aphorismos').<sup>12</sup> The significance of this fact is discussed below.

In *De Augmentis*, Bacon divides moral knowledge into two parts:

the one 'the Exemplar or Platform of Good', the other 'the Regiment or Culture of the Mind', which I also call the Georgics of the Mind; the one describing the nature of good, the other prescribing rules how to accommodate the will of man thereunto. (Works V, 5)

Here it suffices to say that for Bacon, the exemplar of the good given to the moral philosopher through Christian faith is definitive. Christianity "removed and discharged" all doubt concerning man's highest good (Works V, 5), confirming "charity and infinite feeling of communion" as its *summum bonum*.

Since it is not the task of the natural philosopher to settle normative questions regarding the ultimate exemplar of the good – a privilege that ultimately belongs to theology – Bacon's 'Georgics of the Mind' is limited to a factual theory of the characters and "affections and perturbations" of men (McRae, 'The Unity of the Sciences', 28–9). This branch of 'human philosophy' investigates the operation of the faculty of the will, and its relation to appetite and affection (Works IV, 405). Specifically, its goal is to investigate how character traits and affective states are shaped and determined by people's bodily states, their social and cultural surroundings, etc. (Wood, 'Science, Philosophy, and the Mind', 803). This information will provide insight into

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<sup>12</sup> This edition can be consulted at <http://lib.ugent.be/catalog/ebk01:12250000001011002>. For the catalogue of Spinoza's library, see, for example, Aler (*Catalogus van de bibliotheek der Vereniging Het Spinozahuis te Rijnsburg*).

the nature of human volition, and ultimately enable us to mould behavior through education and the ingraining of habits and customs (MacDonald, 'Francis Bacon's Behavioral Psychology'). In sum, in order for moral philosophy to flourish and achieve its actual end – i.e. “procure the affections to fight on the side of reason, and not to invade it” (Works IV, 456) – it needs to be given a solid empirical foundation.

In *De Augmentis*, Bacon devises the “Doctrine concerning the Culture of the Mind” into (1) “the doctrine concerning the characters of the mind”, (2) “the doctrine concerning the affections and perturbations” and (3) “the doctrine concerning the remedies or cures” (Works V, 19). Since for Bacon the exact knowledge of (1) and (2) lays “the groundwork of the doctrine of remedies” it will be useful to take into account their scope and content. Bacon begins by emphasizing the importance for “morality and policy” of the knowledge concerned with “the different characters of natures and dispositions” (Works V, 21). According to Bacon, a proper study of men's various characters contains a discussion of the various

features and lineaments of which they [characters] are composed, and by the various combinations and arrangements of which all characters whatever are made up, showing how many, and of what natures these are, and how connected and subordinate to one another; that so we may have a scientific and accurate dissections of minds and characters ... and that from the knowledge thereof better rules may be framed for the treatment of the mind. (Works V, 22)

For Bacon this knowledge is to be gained above all from “the wiser sort of historians”: “for a character so worked into the narrative gives a better idea of the man, than any formal criticism and review can” (Works V, 21). When he writes that we “are much beholden to Machiavel and others of that class, who openly and unfeigned declare or describe what men do, and not what they ought to do” (Works V, 17) he is advancing a method of observation and analyses of characters devoid from moralizing tendencies.<sup>13</sup> People should acquire an understanding of

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<sup>13</sup> Vickers (*Bacon*, xv, xix) and Dean ('Sir Francis Bacon's Theory of Civil History-Writing', 176). This is not to say that Bacon completely opposes a rhetorical conception of history writing. As we shall see,

human passions as they really are, even if this would make for an unflattering portrayal of the human condition. Indeed, “a virtuous and honest man can do no good upon those that are wicked, to correct and reclaim them, without first exploring all the depths and recesses of their malice” (Works V, 17). “The doctrine concerning the affections and perturbations” (2) is meant to provide men with such an overview of what Bacon calls “the diseases of mind”. Poets and writers of history again are singled out as the best doctors of this knowledge. They skillfully portray how

affections are kindled and excited, and how pacified and restrained ... how they work; how they vary ... how they fight and encounter one another ... [knowledge] of special use in moral and civil matters ... [in order]to set affection against affection, and to use the aid of one to master another ... For as in the government of states it is sometimes necessary to bridle one faction with another, so it is in the internal government of the mind. (Works V, 23–4)

Bacon's view that the proper way to manage the affects is by invoking other affects resembles Spinoza's own discussion of the affects in the *Ethics*. For Spinoza, “an affect can neither be taken away nor restrained except through an opposite and stronger affect” (EIVp7; see also the ‘definitions of the affects’ in EIII). What matters here is Bacon's emphasis on civil history as the principal source of precedents and generalizations in moral philosophy. For Bacon, practical lessons can and should be acquired from observing humanity's past (Jardine, *Francis Bacon*, 151; Tinkler, ‘The Rhetorical Method of Francis Bacon's History of the Reign of King Henry VII’, 44; Wormald, *Francis Bacon*, 61). Civil histories, he tells us, “make men wise” (Works VI, 498). Models for civil histories, moreover, are extant. Bacon singles out the histories of the ‘exemplar states’ (Greece and Rome) by Livy, Tacitus, and Herodian. However, many others (think of Thucydides,

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Bacon distinguishes between the recorder of history and the actual historian who presents the final synthesis of the material provided by the former. The latter will have to rely on various rhetorical techniques and topoi to more easily reach his audience. See Tinkler (‘The Rhetorical Method of Francis Bacon's History of the Reign of King Henry VII’ and *The Cambridge Companion to Bacon*).

Polybius, Caesar, Machiavelli and Guicciardini) too deserve a place in Bacon's secular canon (Wormald, *Francis Bacon*, 54).

Some level of skepticism regarding the applicability of general principles derived from civil history remains warranted. Because civil affairs are so “immersed in matter”, descriptions of the deeds of men can never attain the level of generalization or rigor aimed for in the natural sciences. As Jardine puts it, “the complex activities of men ... require interpretation and assessment to be comprehensible at all” (*Francis Bacon*, 151; see also Dean, ‘Sir Francis Bacon's Theory of Civil History-Writing’, 161–83; Nadel, ‘History as Psychology in Francis Bacon's Theory of History’, 275–87). Bacon, for this reason, emphasizes the distinction between ‘Memorials’ (rough drafts of history), ‘Antiquities’ (remnants of history), and ‘Perfect Histories’ (histories which order and interpret the events narrated). Whereas the former two are labelled as fragmentary and incomplete, only ‘perfect’ histories can function as an immediate source of generalization and precedent. Bacon thus distinguishes between those who merely collect historical data, and wise historians who have the ability to skillfully interpret and present it in a manner useful for moral and civil life (Jardine, *Francis Bacon*, 154; Dean, ‘Sir Francis Bacon's Theory of Civil History-Writing’, 164; Wormald, *Francis Bacon*, 58–61). Indeed, not all types of civil history are considered of actual value. Bacon considers “the greater part” of modern histories as “beneath mediocrity” (Works III, 336) and formulates various reservations against over-simplified and unsubtle applications of ‘universal histories’, epitomes, commentaries, and chronicles (Tinckler, ‘The Rhetorical Method of Francis Bacon's History of the Reign of King Henry VII’, 234; Wormald, *Francis Bacon*, 56; Manzo, ‘Francis Bacon's Natural History and Civil History’, 34–8). Ultimately, as Manzo emphasizes, Bacon's focus lies on the practical commitments of civil history:

civil history must provide the material basis for ethical and political precepts. In this regard, Bacon claimed that in order to fulfil his duties accurately, the historian should be acquainted not only with the virtues but also with the vices of men, for ‘it is not possible to ioyn serpentine wisdom with Columbine Innocency, except men know exactly all the

conditions of the *Serpen*. That kind of knowledge is achieved via complete, detailed and realistic historical narrations of men's actions. (Manzo, 'Francis Bacon's Natural History and Civil History', 34–8)

This in turn explains why Bacon, among the category of perfect history, identifies 'Lives' (histories of single persons) and 'Relations' (narratives of particular actions) as providing the most valuable material for instruction. These histories do not omit and cover up "in silence the smaller passages and motions of men and matters" (Works III, 334) but provide considered accounts of human actions, as well as the states of mind, motives and personalities of those involved. Bacon's discussion brings to mind Plutarch's reflections on bibliographical writing in the *Lives*. Plutarchan biography – concerned above all with character (Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives*) – equally emphasizes the importance of documenting 'minor events' for a proper understanding of the human condition. According to Plutarch,

we are not writing Histories, but Lives. Nor is it always in the most distinguished achievements that men's virtues or vices may be best discerned; but very often an action of small note, a short saying, or a jest, shall distinguish a person's real character, more than the greatest sieges or the most important battles. (*Lives*, 133–4)

Bacon agrees. 'Lives' and 'Relations' contribute substantially to our understanding of men's characters as revealed by their interaction with specific personalities and events, thus providing crucial material for a 'Culture of the Mind'.

Bacon's use of the word 'Civil History' has a particular signification. 'Civil History' should not be understood merely as the massive collection of data regarding the deeds of men provided by history, rather it denotes a skillful synthesis of this material. Good civil history, for Bacon, results in a detailed and vivid historical description of men's actions and vices;<sup>14</sup> a description that will allow the readers to infer from the historical facts their own moral and political observations.

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that the notion of vivid description or 'lively representation' appears in Bacon as a key feature of both civil history *and* rhetorical imaginary. Put differently, the skillful use of images of virtue and vice in civil history also forms an integral part of the office of rhetoric. Bacon explains that through



### 1.3 SPINOZA ON THE USE OF BACONIAN CIVIL HISTORY

This section examines Bacon's discussion of the 'knowledge of negotiation' – a subcategory of civil knowledge which provides men with assistance in everyday business – found in Chapter 2 of Book 8 of *De Augmentis*. This chapter was included in Spinoza's copy of Bacon's *Essays*. I argue that Spinoza, in the letter to Bouwmeester, reformulates the main precepts discussed by Bacon in this very chapter. This insight will confirm Spinoza's interest in Baconian civil history and help us properly delineate Spinoza's own use of it in his writings.

In *De Augmentis*, Bacon's divides the 'doctrine concerning negotiation' into the 'doctrine concerning scattered occasions' and the 'doctrine concerning advancement in life' (also described as 'the architect of fortune'). Whereas the former deals with 'general wisdom' or knowledge useful for all varieties of business, the latter concerns more particular knowledge useful for each man's personal fortune. In what follows, I focus specifically on the latter category.

According to Bacon, human knowledge will be greatly advanced when people come to see the importance of the "wisdom of pressing a man's own fortune", a wisdom "arising out of a universal insight and experience of the affairs of the world ... used indeed upon particular causes, but ... gathered by general observation" (Works V, 36). Bacon identifies proverbs (like those of Salomon), fables, and especially 'histories of lives' and letters – "like those of Cicero to Atticus" – as forms of writing most fitting for this purpose (Works V, 56). It is through the use of literary exemplars, Bacon tells us, that men more easily become acquainted with the variety of dispositions and characters:

for when the example is laid down as the ground of the discourse, it is set down with all the attendant circumstances, which may sometimes correct the discourse thereupon made, and sometimes supply it, as a very pattern for imitation and practice. (ibid.)

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lively and conspicuous images, abstract notions such as virtue and vice more easily find access to the mind (Works IV, 457).

The main point Bacon is conveying here is that by distinguishing an infinite variety of dispositions men will become more able to adept themselves to all sorts of characters. Studying people's actions, words, countenances, dispositions, and ends (Works V, 60) helps us obtain knowledge of men and their behavior. Importantly, it is through the “knowledge of others” that we will be able to more adequately know ourselves and devise a plan of living suited to our own preferences and goals. Indeed,

this variety of knowledge of persons ... returns in the end only to this, that we make a more judicious choice of the actions we undertake, and of the persons whose assistance we use; whereby we may manage and conduct everything with more safety and dexterity. (ibid., 64)

Moreover, in order to achieve this, Bacon emphasizes the need of constant meditation and a steadfast mind. He singles out a number of precepts for reflection that will allow people to proceed more steadily through their inquiries (see Cochrane, ‘Francis Bacon and the Architect of Fortune’ for an overview and discussion of the various precepts). Humans should, for instance, repeatedly “consider how their natural and moral constitution sort with the general state of the times’ and ‘how their nature sorts with the professions and courses of life which are in use and repute” (Works V, 56). In sum, in order for us to properly orient ourselves, we must settle on a suitable way of living adapted to our own abilities and preferences as well as those of others with whom we engage. Importantly, Bacon singles out knowledge of the actions, characters, and vices of men as the knowledge most fitting for improving one's own fortune (Cochrane, ‘Francis Bacon and the Architect of Fortune’, 182). Not only does a reflection on the common condition of man raise awareness of our cognitive impediments, it also helps us to anticipate the behavior of others.

Before we return to Spinoza, one final consideration is in order. As Cochrane (ibid., 178) observes, Bacon's ‘architect of fortune’ metaphor – the idea of raising and making one's own

fortune – was “a Roman commonplace”. Sallust, Plautus, Cicero and many others already asserted that fortune, through human agency, was within the governance of man himself (ibid., 180). However, despite the importance of this subject, books and precepts concerning wisdom of policy in everyday life were rare (ibid., 183). As we have seen, Bacon insists that a genuine science of ‘negotiation or business’ had been neglected, even though certain precepts could be extracted from Solomon's aphorisms and the letters and lives of men. Cochrane therefore concludes that Bacon's reflections on ‘faber fortuna’ constitute, as Bacon himself puts it, “a new and unwonted argument” (ibid.). Bacon not only collected from civil history and its various sources the knowledge concerning ‘faber fortuna’, he also methodized it by grounding its precepts in an empirical study of human nature (ibid., 188).

To summarize: for Bacon the practical pursuit of ‘the knowledge of ourselves’ (central to the Baconian theme of ‘faber fortuna’) requires us to set down distributions and descriptions of men's dispositions, characters, tempers, vices etc. The central operating principles for the architecture of one's own fortune consist in a knowledge of oneself and others; knowledge which helps us choose a course of action within one's abilities. In *De Augmentis*, this knowledge emanates in a number of precepts for constant reflection useful for handling our daily affairs.

When we return to Ep. 37, the Baconian dimension of Spinoza's advice becomes apparent. Spinoza's advice to Bouwmeester corresponds to the general program advanced by Bacon in Chapter 3 of Book 8 of *De Augmentis*. Bouwmeester must above all (1) apply “constant meditation and a most steadfast mind and purpose, to acquire which it is most important to establish a fixed way and manner of life” and (2) come to grips with both the powers and limitations of human cognition. Importantly, this final task does not require a knowledge of the nature of mind through its first cause. It is enough “to formulate a brief account of the mind or its perceptions in the manner expounded by Verulam” (Ep. 37, 861). Spinoza's claim that a philosophical understanding of the mind at this stage is not needed to properly distinguish between the various perceptions, from a Baconian point of view, makes a great deal of sense.

Bacon's discussion of the 'doctrine concerning negotiation' centers around the importance of history for the understanding of our own condition and that of others. Verulam again identifies civil history as *the* branch of learning particularly capable of revealing and dissecting the various characters of men, hence providing crucial knowledge for establishing a way of life suited to one's abilities.

In the TTP, the exact same message reappears. Spinoza, referring to the historical narratives of Scripture, remarks that:

reading them is very useful in relation to civil life. For the more we have observed and the better we know the customs and characters of men – which can best be known from their actions – the more cautiously we will be able to live among them and the better we will be able to accommodate our actions and lives to their mentality, as much as reason allows. (TTP 4.10; GIII 61–2)

Whether Bacon himself advocates a similar use of Scripture remains doubtful.<sup>15</sup> He does, however, recommend Salomon's proverbs as a form of writing particularly useful for civil life. This suggests that divinity – or at the very least 'divine poesy' – for Bacon sometimes has the use Spinoza in TTP 4.10 attributes to Scripture in general. At any rate, Spinoza in the TTP explicitly attributes to Scripture the same utility and function Bacon attributes to Civil history in *De Augmentis*.

The TTP's emphasis on the importance of observing the actions of men for a practical, everyday morality is found also in the *Ethics*. While criticizing 'satirists' who laugh at human affairs, theologians who curse them, and 'melancholics' who disdain men and prefer to admire

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<sup>15</sup> In *De Augmentis*, Bacon subsumes ecclesiastical history under the category of Civil History, indicating his preference to apply to matters of the church the same method of inquiry as the history of politics. Bacon, however, carefully delineates the subject matter and scope of sacred history. He distinguishes three specific branches: (1) 'History of Prophecy' dealing with prophecies and their accomplishment in the temporal word; (2) 'History of Divine Judgments or Providence' concerned with manifestations of God's divine plan, and (3) 'Ecclesiastical History Special' or Church history describing "the state of the Church in persecution, in remove, and in peace" (Works IV, 312–3). However, the precepts to be extracted from these branches of history appear more related to what Bacon would call the future of religion and the fulfilment of God's plan for the world rather than to human ethical and political action.

animals, Spinoza writes that “it is much more preferable and more worthy of our knowledge to consider the deeds of men” (EIVp35s). Spinoza, remarkably enough, concludes the scholium by saying that he ‘shall treat this topic more fully elsewhere’. While it remains somewhat unclear as to what piece of writing he is referring to, the emphasis on the relevance of contemplating the actions of men is indisputable.

We have seen earlier that commentators like De Dijn (*Spinoza*) interpret Spinoza's letter to Bouwmeester within the general framework of Spinoza's reflections on method as developed in the TIE. Spinoza's advice to settle on a suitable way of life according to a fixed plan is related to his discussion of the importance of a provisional morality discussed in TIE §17. While this connection undoubtedly holds true, this chapter argues that commentators have failed to recognize Spinoza's reference to a *historiola mentis* à la Bacon – i.e. to Baconian-like civil histories – as the crucial link connecting Spinoza's thoughts on method. Indications for this reading are also found in the *Ethics*. In EVp10s, Spinoza again introduces the role of a provisional morality. He writes:

The best thing, then, that we can do, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to conceive a correct principle of living, or sure maxims of life, to commit them to memory, and to apply them constantly to the particular cases frequently encountered in life ... For example, we have laid it down as a maxim of life (see IVP46 and P46S) that hate is to be conquered by love, *or* nobility ... But in order that we may always have this rule of reason ready when it is needed, **we ought to think about and meditate frequently on the common wrongs of men**, and how they may be warded off best by nobility. For if we join the image of a wrong to the imagination of this maxim, it will always be ready for us (by IIP18) when a wrong is done to us. (EVp10s; emphasis mine)

To have perfect knowledge of our affects is to have a philosophical understanding of them; or, what amounts to the same thing, is to know the nature of the mind and its affections through their first cause. Although, according to Spinoza, all affects in principle can be conceived adequately (EVp4), our power of forming clear and distinct ideas often is hindered by external

causes (EIVp4c). Regardless of the fact that in reality we often are torn by affects contrary to our nature, Spinoza in EVp10 indicates that we still have the freedom to commit ourselves to a provisional morality centered around a number of maxims of life. As in the letter to Bouwmeester, the *Ethics* establishes a connection between the need for a provisional morality and the absence of a perfect knowledge of the mind through its first cause. Importantly, Spinoza here too introduces knowledge of the common wrongs of men – i.e. knowledge of men's passionate behavior – as essential for acquiring such an ethical outlook. The more we acquaint ourselves with the human condition, the less we will be struck by emotionally upsetting situations arising from our interactions with others. Within this context, Spinoza's reference in the letter to Bouwmeester to Baconian-like histories – understood here as civil history – again makes a lot of sense.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the particular nature of Spinoza's correspondence with Bouwmeester. Letter 37 under discussion was preceded by another letter addressed to “the learned and experienced Johan Bouwmeester” (Ep. 28, 840). In what has been called a “strange and uncharacteristic” letter, Spinoza beseeches his friend to rekindle their decreasing interaction. Although Bouwmeester's response is lost, the context suggests that Bouwmeester experienced difficulties with Spinoza's philosophy and hence felt certain hesitation regarding the fruitfulness of their correspondence (Garrett, *Meaning in Spinoza's Method*, 77). Spinoza, however, goes to great lengths to reassure his friend of his “abilities”, defusing the latter's fear that he should “ask or propose something unbecoming a man of learning” (Ep. 28, 840).

The fact that Spinoza reminds Bouwmeester, and him in particular, of the importance of a *historiola mentis* à la Bacon again appears far from random. Bouwmeester – student of philosophy and doctor in medicine – above all dedicated himself to the study of literature, linguistics, and theatre arts (Meinsma, *Spinoza en zijn kring*, 151, 439). If Spinoza wanted to reassure his friend of the importance of his input, what more could he do than emphasize the

importance of civil history – Bouwmeester's own area of expertise – for philosophy. Moreover, by doing so, Spinoza could reestablish Bacon's claim for the importance of civil history as a bridge builder between philosophy and practical learning. Bacon begins his discussion of the doctrine of negotiation with the following words:

The science of negotiation has not hitherto been handled in proportion to the importance of the subject, to the great derogation of learning and the professors thereof. For from this root springs chiefly that evil, with which the learned have been branded; *‘That there is no great concurrence between learning and practical wisdom.’* For if it be rightly observed, ... the wisdom of behavior is by learned men for the most part despised, as a thing servile, and moreover an enemy to meditation ... [but] if books [of this kind] were written ... I doubt not but learned men with little experience would far excel men of long experience without learning, and outshoot them (as they say) in their own bow. (Works V, 35)

Spinoza's correspondence with “the learned and experienced” Bouwmeester provided him with an ideal context for reestablishing civil history as an indispensable part of the moral culture of the mind.

#### 1.4 OBJECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this concluding section, I address two objections to my thesis. First, in his correspondence with Henry Oldenburg, Spinoza criticizes Bacon for having strayed from knowledge of first causes, for having misunderstood the human mind, and for having misunderstood the cause of true error (Ep. 2, 762). The question emerges as to how the positive account of Bacon presented here can be made consistent with the explicit rejection of Baconian principles in this letter. Second, readers might object that a number of themes here attributed to Bacon were available to Spinoza via shared sources. Bacon's reflections on civil history trace back to, or correspond to, writings of previous authors; writers Spinoza too had access to. Why should Bacon be regarded as the author most influential upon Spinoza in matters of ‘civil history’?

First, in a letter to Spinoza (August 1661), Oldenburg encourages him to explain in more depth what defects he finds in the philosophy of Descartes and Bacon. Spinoza grants Oldenburg's demand, albeit with some hesitance:

I shall try to oblige you, although it is not my custom to expose the errors of others. The first and most important error is this, that they have gone far astray from knowledge of the first cause and origin of all things. Secondly, they have failed to understand the true nature of the human mind. Thirdly, they have never grasped the true cause of error. Only those who are completely destitute of all learning and scholarship can fail to see the critical importance of true knowledge of these three points. (Ep. 2, 762)

Spinoza withholds an excess of commentary on the first two points; instead he highlights the fundamental ontological divide between himself and Bacon. A major fault is made by anyone committed to a conception of nature that admits the ontological principles Bacon – in Spinoza's opinion – held, that is, that there is a transcendent God, that nature is produced by God, and that the transcendent God alone is infinite. For Spinoza, these principles embed a philosophy in a metaphysical picture that will result in a proliferation of errors that will be expressed as the system evolves.

Nor did Spinoza feel the need to expand much on Bacon's third point of error, that is, Bacon's inability to grasp the true cause of error. He contents himself with briefly identifying the main causes Bacon mistakenly attributed as being its source. Spinoza starts by citing particular passages from the *Novum Organum* where Bacon describes various epistemological flaws resulting from the nature of the intellect. According to Spinoza, Bacon takes for granted that the human intellect (1) “fashions everything after the analogy of its own nature, and not after the analogy of the universe, so that it is like a mirror presenting an irregular surface to the rays it receives, mingling its own nature with the nature of reality”, (2) “is prone to abstractions, and imagines as stable things that are in flux”, (3) “is in constant activity, and cannot come to a halt or rest” and (4) “is not characterized as a dry light, but receives infusion from the will” (Ep. 2, 762–3).



Since Bacon “often takes the intellect for mind”, Spinoza seems willing to disregard the first three epistemological flaws “as being of lesser importance” than the fourth (ibid.); a qualification with some implications, as we shall see. It also becomes clear that he chooses here to explicitly confront the fourth flaw because by beginning with it he will eventually undermine the foundation from which all of them emerge. Indeed, by the end of his letter to Oldenburg we see Spinoza, while addressing Bacon's error regarding free will, returning to the crucial Spinozistic distinction between the intellect and the imagination. Bacon, Spinoza repeatedly indicates, failed to properly distinguish between them. To make his point, Spinoza prefers to show Oldenburg the inadequacy of the principle that “the human will is free and more extensive than the intellect” (ibid.) I will here pass over Spinoza's argument against free will as presented in letter 2. Regardless, the fundamental point Spinoza is trying to convey to Oldenburg is that the intellect cannot be a source of error in man.

In the letter to Oldenburg, Spinoza gives the impression of a rather unsympathetic reflection on Baconian philosophy. This letter, containing the most elaborate and explicit discussion of Baconian principles, shows Spinoza's reluctance to associate himself with a philosophical system grounded in fundamentally different ontological and epistemological premises. However, Spinoza's critique of Bacon – who, like Descartes, “failed to understand the true nature of the human mind” (Ep. 2, 762) – should be approached with some carefulness. Spinoza, as mentioned above, adds specifically that Bacon “often takes the intellect for mind, therein differing from Descartes”; an admission that allows him to disregard the first three epistemological flaws “as being of lesser importance” than the fourth (Ep. 2, 763). Now, points 1–3 are references to Bacon's discussion in the *Novum Organon* of the internal impediments related to the ‘idols of the tribe’.

In (1) Spinoza refers to *Novum Organum* I, §41. Bacon there sets out the mind's preconception to fashion “everything after the analogy of its own nature, and not after the analogy of the universe”. His principal point is to show that the assertion that “human sense is

the measure of things” is false (OFB XI, 79). In (2) Spinoza refers to *Novum Organum* I, §51. Bacon there reminds us that the human understanding is prone to abstractions, and imagines as stable things that are in flux. Instead of studying “matter and its schematisms”, we lose ourselves in abstract speculations and false assertions (OFB XI, 89). As he explains in I, §45: “The human intellect is constitutionally prone to supposing that there is more order and equality in things than it actually finds ... it counterfeits parallels, correspondences and relatives which do not exist” (OFB XI, 83). Finally, (3) refers to *Novum Organum* I, §48. Bacon's here deals with the restlessness of the mind, that is, with its dissatisfaction “with perfectly good fundamental explanations, mistakenly and constantly seeking some more fundamental cause ad infinitum” (Gaukroger, ‘Francis Bacon’, 449). A preconception related to the mind's tendency to fall back on things that are more familiar, “namely final causes which obviously come from the nature of man rather than of the universe” (OFB XI, 87).

What matters here is that Spinoza exposes in others the very same prejudices here identified by Bacon in *Novum Organum*. Spinoza's reflections on the limits of sense perception are well known (it suffices to direct attention to the division of knowledge presented in EIIp40s2 and the discussion of ‘prejudices’ in EI appendix). Moreover, Spinoza also urges his readers to distinguish the real from the imaginary (see his discussion of *entia realia* and *entia rationes* in the *Short Treatise*). He too scrutinizes the belief in final causes – a “doctrine ... [which] turns Nature completely upside down”. Finally, Spinoza targets those who “in their ignorance of things and of their own nature [believe] that there is an order in things” (EI appendix.). In short, we have good reason to assume that Spinoza was not dismissive of Bacon's theory of the idols, on the contrary. Spinoza's critique in the letter to Oldenburg is not that Bacon failed to identify these prejudices. Rather, it is that Bacon failed to recognize the true origin of these misconceptions, namely the imagination. Bacon mistakenly identified the intellect itself as their source.

What our analysis of Ep. 2 reveals is that the role of the intellect, and its role in error, is the central issue that divides Spinoza from Bacon. For Spinoza, epistemic inadequacy should be

traced back to the workings of the imagination, not the intellect.<sup>16</sup> To bring home this point, Spinoza employs the Baconian idols of the tribe against Bacon himself. However, this move should not be read as a rejection of the Baconian theory of the idols. Indeed, as mentioned in Section 1, Spinoza too defends the claim that in order for us to orient ourselves in a legitimate way, acquaintance with the limits of human cognition is needed. Moreover, like Verulam, Spinoza considers an inquiry into the roots of cognitive error an integral part of the process of emending or purging the mind. While Spinoza's metaphysics differs starkly from Bacon's, both authors nonetheless share important *methodological* assumptions. Spinoza's letter to Oldenburg should not, therefore, weigh too much against Bacon's influence on Spinoza.

Spinoza's awareness, arguably indebtedness, to Bacon's discussion of the idols also helps us address the second objection: why should Bacon be regarded as the author most influential on Spinoza in matters of 'civil history'? This is a legitimate question. After all, Machiavelli, whose influence on Bacon is well documented (see, e.g. Curley, 'Kissinger, Spinoza, and Genghis Khan') already defended a realist approach to morals and politics in focusing on 'what men do, and not what they ought to do'. Similarly, Plutarch – and with him many other 'later' Greek historians such as Polybius – also advocated a realist approach to history writing and the study of characters in particular (Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives*, 6). Bacon's emphasis on the therapeutic, practical side of philosophy, on the other hand, can be traced back to Seneca who also advocated the use of literary exemplars for morality (Trinacty, 'Like Father, Like Son?'). Given that Spinoza was thoroughly familiar with these authors (see his references in the TTP) one might question the exclusive focus on Bacon in my reconstruction.

There is, unfortunately, little explicit evidence to definitively settle this question. However, fact is that in the letter to Bouwmeester Spinoza mentions Bacon, and Bacon alone. Moreover, questions of originality and influence should not distract us from what is really at stake

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<sup>16</sup> For an extensive treatment of this crucial point of departure between Spinoza and Bacon, see Schneider and Van Cauter ('Spinoza: A Baconian in the TTP, but not in the *Ethics*?').

here. This chapter reveals, in the first place, that Spinoza assumes in readers and correspondents like Bouwmeester a basic familiarity with the Baconian system,<sup>17</sup> and, second, that Spinoza finds Bacon's work important enough to help illuminate his own approach. Put differently, while other philosophers before Bacon had dealt with similar matters, Spinoza expresses a preference for Bacon's way of treating them. What is significant about our investigation is the emphasis on a philosophical practice that combines the need for a provisional morality with a historical-informed study of human dispositions and life-styles. Spinoza's advice to Bouwmeester brings to mind an essential feature of the early modern *cultura animi* tradition: the need for a diagnosis of the agitations or “the troubles of the idol-producing mind” as part of a project of ‘curing’ the human faculties (Corneanu and Vermeir, ‘Idols of the Imagination’, 184; Harrison, ‘Francis Bacon, Natural Philosophy, and the Cultivation of the Mind’, 146). Bacon, it is well known, is an important proponent of this movement.

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<sup>17</sup> We have direct evidence that Spinoza's choice for Bacon, at least partially, can be understood in terms of his audience's familiarity with the Baconian system. Bouwmeester's library, for instance, contained no less than eight Baconian works, including *De Augmentis*, the *History of Henry VII*, and Bacon's *Essays*. The catalogue of Bouwmeester's library can be found at: [http://www.bibliothek.uni-augsburg.de/dda/urn/urn\\_uba002800-uba002999/uba002972/](http://www.bibliothek.uni-augsburg.de/dda/urn/urn_uba002800-uba002999/uba002972/).

## CHAPTER 2: SPINOZA ON BACON AND ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY

The purpose of this chapter is to show the importance and centrality of Bacon to the development of Spinoza's views on biblical hermeneutics as presented in the TTP. Although commentators have remarked that Spinoza construes his exegetical method in analogy with Bacon's 'natural history' – placing, like Bacon, emphasis on the construction of a *historia* or systematic catalogue of empirical data from which to infer more general principles – the full extent of Bacon's role has not yet been determined. This chapter argues that Spinoza's application of the Baconian *ars historica* to Scripture provides the framework from which to approach some of the most puzzling questions that arise in the context of Spinoza's views on the interpretation of Scripture. Specifically, it shows that both Spinoza's radical rejection in the TTP of all appeals to supernatural inspiration, and his notorious revision of biblical miracles – as having natural rather than supernatural causal explanations – are best understood in light of Bacon's discussion of ancient historical texts and the difficulties related to their transmission and interpretation. That is, Spinoza motivates his rejection of both principles in light of the biased and corrupted transmission and reception of biblical texts. Both principles are presented as theological fabrications falsely introduced throughout the ages; the product of "negligence not to say wickedness of those men who were indifferent to the History of Scripture" (TTP 7.73; GIII 112).

I argue that Spinoza, by doing so, reformulates a worry already advanced by Bacon in *De Augmentis*: our reading and understanding of historical documents is often biased as a consequence of the operation of historical forces on their preservation and diffusion. Bacon, admittedly, would not be the first to alert the reader to the insidious role played by language, representation and the transmission of knowledge. Tacitus and Lipsius, two authors greatly admired by Verulam himself, already put forward a view of human history dominated by imagined and fabricated accounts of reality, exposing 'feigned history' and make-believe

representations as ubiquitous devices for the maintenance of power (see especially Giglioni, ‘Philosophy according to Tacitus: Francis Bacon and the inquiry into the limits of human self-delusion’). Spinoza, who in all likelihood was familiar with their work,<sup>18</sup> could have drawn from a wider tradition. However, this chapter shows that Spinoza had good reasons for calling attention to Bacon’s particular treatment of these matters. Key here, we will see, is Bacon’s hesitancy, throughout his writings, to unconditionally apply his reflections regarding the ‘critical and pedagogical’ complexities related to the transmission of knowledge to the Bible. Bacon, at least openly, never extended its application to Scripture. His writings, however, simultaneously express a critical awareness of what such an application would entail for an adequate understanding of church history.

In the TTP, Spinoza casts theology’s traditional understanding of (1) supernatural illumination – as a necessary requisite for a true understanding of Scripture – and (2) miracles – as interruptions or contraventions of the order of nature – into the ash heap of intellectual rubbish that has permitted the misconstruing of Scripture’s core moral message. Our understanding of the Bible, Spinoza tells us, does not rely on any supernatural light: “the standard of interpretation must be nothing but the natural light common to all” (TTP 7.94; GIII 117). The text, when properly interpreted, ascribes natural causes even to those events it presents as miracles: “nowhere does [Scripture] teach that anything happens in nature which is contrary to its laws, or which cannot follow from them. So these things ought not to be fictitiously ascribed to Scripture” (TTP 6.69; GIII 96-7).

A number of commentators have remarked that Spinoza’s *modus operandi* introduces a significant tension in the TTP (e.g. Zac, *Spinoza et l’interprétation de l’Écriture*, 206; Gregory, ‘Introduction’, 42; Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*, 197-201). Criteria of

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<sup>18</sup> It is well known that Lipsius was of great importance for the spread of Tacitism in sixteenth century Europe; he produced several authoritative and influential editions and discussions of Tacitus’ works. See, for instance, Morford, ‘Tacitean Prudentia and the Doctrines of Justus Lipsius’ and Leira, ‘Justus Lipsius, political humanism and the disciplining of 17th century statecraft’. Spinoza’s library contained an edition of Tacitus’ *Opera* as edited by Lipsius.

rationality, in clear breach with Spinoza's own prescriptions for interpreting the Bible, seem to dictate his rejection of these doctrines. Put differently, Spinoza's allegiance to naturalism appears to contaminate his reading of Scripture. *Pace* such readings, this chapter argues that Spinoza's dismissal of (1) and (2) follows logically from his treatment of the Bible as a product of civil history, i.e. a work of human industry fully subject to historical manipulation and corruption. Spinoza does not violate his own critique of rationalist or 'dogmatic' theories of biblical hermeneutics according to which biblical writings are interpreted so as to make them consistent with reason. Rather, he spells out the consequences of a historical approach to Scripture, the primary intention of which is to discover the 'mind of Scripture's authors' (*mentes auctorum scripturae*). This latter category, however, must be broadly interpreted: scribal errors and intentional changes during the history of textual transmission are taken into account. In sum: by integrating Scripture within the canon of civil history – extending Bacon's reflections regarding the biased transmission of knowledge to the Bible itself – Spinoza is capable of providing a theological rationale for the rejection of (1) and (2); a rejection fully grounded in a hermeneutics that admits "no other principles or data for interpreting Scripture and discussing it than those drawn from Scripture itself and its history" (TTP 7.8; GIII 98).

This chapter proceeds as follows. In Section 2.1, I examine in detail the method of exegesis put forward by Spinoza and highlight his unique implementation of the *sola scriptura* principle – 'Scripture alone' *and* its history – that is a definitive factor in the structure of his prescription for scriptural interpretation. This will launch us into the next section, which briefly shows how Spinoza's prescription for interpreting the Bible corresponds to the general methodology of Baconian natural science. Section 2.3 considers one crucial implication of Spinoza's *modus operandi* in the TTP: Spinoza's application of the Baconian *ars historica* to Scripture results in a total rejection of appeals to the supernatural light in matters of exegesis. Theology's traditional reliance on inspiration is explained away in light of our fragmented, even corrupted understanding of the biblical text. That is, appeals to the supernatural lack scriptural

basis; they indicate above all an indifference to the history of Scripture.

Spinoza's reliance on a 'Baconian' approach to the study of Scripture ultimately reveals a discontentment with Verulam's own treatment of the Bible. Section 2.4 redirects attention to *De Augmentis Scientiarum* where Bacon presents his most elaborate discussion of biblical hermeneutics. According to *De Augmentis*, the Bible should never be treated like just any other historical document; a natural-historical inquiry cannot be performed in light of the divine origin and transcendent nature of Scripture's core principles. For Bacon, reason, in matters of interpretation, can only take us so far; in a crucial respect the reader of Scripture must depend on 'divine illumination' and 'inspiration' to acquire a true understanding of the text. Spinoza's application of Bacon's method for interpreting nature to Scripture is remarkable. Spinoza ends up applying the Baconian natural-historical method to a field of enquiry from which Bacon explicitly excludes it. Paradoxically, Spinoza's rejection of all appeals to the supernatural in matters of exegesis is a direct consequence of his application of Baconian methodology to Scripture.

However, a careful and critical reading of *De Augmentis* simultaneously reveals Bacon's willingness to increasingly apply secular reasoning to matters of the Church. Section 2.5 shows, also taking into account Bacon's activities in the *Essays*, *Sylva Sylvarum*, and *Novum Organum*, that Verulam came remarkably close to formulating a naturalized account of various aspects of the religious phenomena. Bacon not only suggests naturalistic explanations of miracles, he goes as far as to reduce religious idolatry and superstition to the mere workings of the imagination. We will see that while Bacon himself never performed a fully fleshed-out natural history of religion, his writings mark an important, even groundbreaking point of departure for further inquiry. Finally, in Section 2.6, I present and discuss a Baconian reading of Spinoza's controversial treatment of miracles in the TTP.



## 2.1 SPINOZA ON BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

In Chapter 7 of the TTP, Spinoza introduces what he identifies as the only true method of interpreting Scripture (TTP 7.43; GIII 106). The core principle of this approach is that “all knowledge of Scripture must be sought only from Scripture itself.”<sup>19</sup> The study of the Bible is defined by the sola scriptura principle, but when we discuss the canonical writings we must also take into account its history. A robust and adequate exploration of Scripture admits “no other principles or data for interpreting Scripture and discussing it than those drawn from Scripture itself and its history” (TTP 7.8; GIII 98. See also TTP 7.14; GIII 99 and TTP 15.25; GIII 185). Spinoza proposes a method of biblical exegesis identical to the method of interpreting nature:

For the method of interpreting nature consists above all in putting together a history of nature, from which, as from certain data, we infer the definitions of natural things. In the same way, to interpret Scripture it is necessary to prepare a straightforward history of Scripture and to infer from it the mind of Scripture's authors, by legitimate reasonings, as from certain data and principles. (TTP 7.7; GIII 98)

It is possible to identify three stages in Spinoza's proposed method of interpreting Scripture. First, it requires the construction of a Baconian-like history of Scripture. The goal is to avoid as much as possible twisting “the meaning of Scripture according to the dictates of our own reason and according to our own preconceived opinions” (TTP 7.22; GIII 101). Second, it requires an inquiry into the ‘mind of Scripture authors’ (*mentem auctorum Scripturae*). The objective of this stage is to infer the primary intention of the prophets and historians who authored Scripture from a given collection of its history. Third, we examine more particular prophetic teachings in light of Scripture's core message: “Once we rightly know this universal teaching of Scripture, we must next proceed to other, less universal things” (TTP 7.29; GIII 103).

In order to construct a Baconian-like history that meets the requirement of objectivity

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<sup>19</sup> TTP 7.12; GIII 99. See also TTP 7.22; GIII 101) and Spinoza's letter to Burgh: “the fundamental principle of the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus that Scripture must be explained only through Scripture” (Ep. 76, 950).

and provides the material for the interpretation taking place in the second and third stage, Spinoza outlines specific guidelines: an adequate history of the Bible takes into account (i) the nature and properties of the language in which it was written (TTP 7.15; GIII 99-100), as well as (ii) the specific historical circumstances of each book, i.e. the life, character and concerns of its author, its intended audience (TTP 7.23; GIII 101). This, Spinoza emphasizes, includes (iii) the reception of the work and the way it came to be accepted in the canon.<sup>20</sup>

Besides containing a thorough linguistic and historic analysis of each book, the history of Scripture must (iv) collect all the sayings of each book and (v) organize them “under main headings so that we can readily find all those concerning the same subject.” The completion of a proper subject index in turn facilitates a final preparatory task. The interpreter of Scripture must (vi) compose a list of seemingly inconsistent utterances of one and the same prophet and subsequently determine – as far as possible – the prophet’s true opinion regarding the matter at hand (TTP 7.16; GIII 100).

The specific procedure Spinoza proposes for this final step deserves critical attention. It reveals both the strengths and weaknesses of a method that recognizes no foundation other than Scripture itself. The only way to perform this exercise in a manner that remains faithful to the text, Spinoza tells us, is to attend primarily to the literal meaning of each of these utterances (see, for instance, Savan, ‘Spinoza: Scientist and Theorist of Scientific Method’, 99). To clarify this requirement, he provides an example: Moses in Deuteronomy 4:24 says that ‘God is a fire.’ Although the literal meaning of this statement is contrary to the natural light, we have no other option than to retain it.<sup>21</sup> We must, in other words, maintain that Moses either believed this or he

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<sup>20</sup> See TTP 7.24-5; GIII 101-2: “Finally, it’s important to know the other things I’ve also mentioned, in order to know, in addition to the authority of each book, whether it could have been corrupted by falsifying hands, and whether errors have crept in or whether they have been corrected by men sufficiently expert and worthy of trust. We absolutely need to know all these things, so that we may embrace only what is certain and indubitable, and not be carried away by a blind impulse to accept whatever has been thrust upon us”.

<sup>21</sup> Spinoza explicitly opposes the Maimonidean approach to Scriptural exegesis. According to Maimonides, each biblical passage must ultimately be interpreted so that its meaning contains nothing which does not agree with reason or is contradictory to reason. Consequently, if a “literal meaning is contrary to reason -

wished to teach it. Vital problems arise when there is an obvious conflict between multiple utterances taken by their literal meaning. Although Moses said that ‘God is a fire’, he also clearly taught that “God has no likeness to any visible things in the heavens, on the earth, or in the sea” (TTP 7.19; GIII 101). The only way to resolve this tension is to interpret one of the contrary statements metaphorically. Importantly, this tool of interpretation is only allowed when there are reasons contained within the linguistic usage that permit a deviation of the literal meaning (TTP 7.20; GIII 101). To see if this is the case, we must consult the table of utterances pertaining to the subject (which is the result of completing the third task Spinoza provides the Scriptural interpreter). In this example, it refers to the collection of Moses’s opinions regarding the form of God. There are reasons internal to the text itself that allow the interpreter to deviate from the literal meaning. Moses in Deuteronomy 4:24 would also say that ‘God is jealous.’ For this reason, we can understand the text itself as providing an alternative meaning for ‘fire’. A simple linguistic analysis grounded on internal biblical evidence allows us to interpret ‘God is fire’ as ‘God is jealous.’ Again, this process remains a part of the first step of interpreting Scripture with a degree of objectivity. Since Moses on several occasions teaches that God is jealous, and nowhere claims that God lacks passions, the texts provide sufficient evidence to take this as Moses’s actual teaching (TTP 7.22; GIII 101). However, in many cases linguistic usage will not provide the interpreter with an alternative meaning for problematic sayings. Utterances often remain irreconcilable, leaving us no alternative than to suspend our judgment about them (TTP 7.21; GIII 101). The goal, after all, was “to maintain nothing as certainly the teaching of the Prophets unless it follows from this history, or is derived from it as clearly as possible.” (TTP 7.26; GIII 102).

The second stage of Scriptural interpretation moves beyond the objective histories, compiled in stage one – insofar as objectivity is possible – to the act of interpreting the text. The

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no matter how clear the literal meaning seemed to be - he thinks it should still be interpreted differently” (TTP 7.75; GIII 113). Spinoza puts clear restriction on the use of metaphorical interpretations. At any rate, for Spinoza the goal of biblical exegesis can never be to interpret Scripture so as to make it consistent with reason. For Spinoza’s full discussion of Maimonidean exegesis, see TTP 7.75-87; GIII 113-116.

goal of this stage will be to infer the ‘mind of Scripture’s authors’ from the just-completed history (I\*TP 7.7; GIII 98). Spinoza describes the *modus operandi* that will allow us to achieve this goal as follows: “Once we have this history of Scripture ... then it will be time for us to prepare to investigate the intentions of the Prophets and the Holy Spirit” (I\*TP 7.26; GIII 102).<sup>22</sup> Spinoza again provides specific guidelines on how to proceed: “the first thing to be sought from the history of Scripture is what is most universal, what is the basis and foundation of the whole of Scripture, and finally, what all the Prophets commend in it as an eternal teaching, most useful for all mortals”. This causes no real difficulty. The fundamental principles of the whole of Scripture all tend to this point: “that a unique and omnipotent God exists, who alone is to be worshipped, who cares for all, and who loves above all those who worship him and who love their neighbor as themselves, etc.”. The Bible “teaches these and similar things everywhere, so clearly and so explicitly that there has never been anyone who disputed the meaning of Scripture concerning these things” (I\*TP 7.27-8; GIII 102). Speculative teachings that concern the specific nature of that God – “whether he is fire, spirit, light, thought, etc.” (I\*TP 14.30; GIII 178) – and the manner in which he provides for all things, however, cannot be counted as belonging to Scripture’s eternal doctrine. The Bible does not teach this explicitly, and the prophets themselves disagreed on the matter: “so concerning such things we must maintain nothing as the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, even if it can be determined very well by the natural light” (I\*TP 7.28; GIII 103).

Once the fundamental teaching of Scripture, i.e. the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, is established, we are in the position to proceed to more specific, less universal, biblical statements (I\*TP 7.29; GIII 103; stage three). According to Spinoza these things can easily be divided into two categories: sayings which concern the way we should conduct our lives; and matters of pure speculation that do not pertain to Scripture’s eternal doctrine, including ‘narrations of things’ (for this distinction see I\*TP 7.29; GIII 103 & I\*TP 7.35; GIII 104). In regards to the first category of biblical statements, i.e. the moral teachings of the prophets, Spinoza tells us that they all “flow

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<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that Spinoza’s emphasis on the search for the intentions of the authors undermines the notion of divine authorship.

from this universal teaching like streams” (TTP 7.29; GIII 103). They each are specific expressions of Scripture’s core teaching ‘to love God above all else and your neighbor as yourself.’ Each prophet, we should remember, worked in a specific historical context. Despite the many perspectives that the prophets’ teachings come from, it is no difficult matter to resolve interpretative disputes among prophets regarding proper moral conduct. Indeed, should a dispute arise, one need only look to the many other prophets for an explanation of why each teaching is a particular way, giving each utterance a context that makes it interpretable (TTP 7.29-35; GIII 103-4). The core teaching is revealed by looking to other prophets because this teaching will occur in each; the specific differences will subsequently highlight what is contextual.

This line of thought cannot be applied to the second category of biblical statements. First, such statements lack the fundamental ground that allows resolution in disputes about statements of moral conduct: there is no agreement among the prophets concerning speculative matters that do not pertain to Scripture’s eternal doctrine (TTP 7.35; GIII 104). Consequently, we cannot infer the mind of one prophet from that of another. This line of thought applies equally to all instances where prophets “relate miracles and historical narratives” (TTP 7.56; GIII 109). These ‘narrations of things’ “were very much accommodated to the prejudices of each age. So it is not at all permissible for us to infer or explain the intention of one prophet from the clearer passage of another” (TTP 7.35; GIII 104). The means we have at our disposal to untangle obscure and ambiguous utterances of this category are very limited. In accordance with the above mentioned example of Moses, we can try to ‘unearth’ the true meaning of an obscure passage by mutual comparison of utterances. Spinoza makes it very clear that we will not be able to do this in every instance: “it’s only by chance that the comparison of utterances can throw light on an utterance” (TTP 7.56; III/109). Since we do not have complete knowledge of the Hebrew language, we lack the interpretive tools to discover with certainty the true meaning of the narrations we find in Scripture.<sup>23</sup> All that remains is the literal meaning of words and stories, which is often highly

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<sup>23</sup> On the various linguistic difficulties see TTP 7.45-55; GIII106-8 and TTP 7.64; GIII 110-1.

incomprehensible from the standpoint of the intellect.<sup>24</sup>

The issue of interpretation is further complicated by the fact that we only possess a highly fragmented history of the circumstances of the books of Scripture. In order for us to properly interpret the writings of the Bible, we require some knowledge of its authors, as well as the context in which they were written; knowledge that, for the most part, is no longer available to us.<sup>25</sup> This has far-reaching consequences:

If we read a book which contains incredible or incomprehensible things, or is written in very obscure terms, and we don't know its author, or when or on what occasion it was written, it will be pointless for us to try to become more certain of its true meaning. If we're ignorant of all these things, we can't know *anything* about what the author intended, or could have intended. (TTP 7.59-60; GIII/109-10)<sup>26</sup>

Consequently and necessarily, there are many inexplicable and incomprehensible utterances and narratives in Holy Scripture (TTP 7.57; GIII 109).

The fact that “in a great many places either we don't know what Scripture really means or we're just guessing about its meaning without any certainty” (TTP 7.65; GIII 111), is no cause for despair. According to Spinoza, it simply results from consistent neglect to give proper attention to a history of Scripture throughout the ages.<sup>27</sup> There is cause for alarm in the manner in which theologians have accustomed themselves to systematically corrupt Scripture. Not only did they have the audacity to interpret Scripture in a way that primarily suited their own ambition, they fictitiously ascribed to the texts certain doctrines and fancies that had nothing to do with a benevolent motivation in making the word of God accessible (see TTP 7.4; GIII 97 and TTP 8.2;

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<sup>24</sup> Spinoza writes: “those obscure symbols and stories which seem to surpass all belief, I call incomprehensible” (TTP 7.66; GIII 111, Adn. VIII).

<sup>25</sup> “Either we are completely ignorant of the authors (or, if you prefer, Writers) of many of the books, or else we have doubts about them” (TTP 7.58; GIII 109). See, for instance, Van Bunge, *Spinoza Past and Present*, 109.

<sup>26</sup> For Spinoza's full discussion on the various difficulties concerning the history of the circumstances of all books of Scripture see TTP 7.58-63; GIII 109-10.

<sup>27</sup> “Though such a history is very necessary, the Ancients still neglected it. Or if they wrote any of it (or handed it down [in an oral tradition]), that has perished by the assault of time. So a large part of the foundations and principles of this knowledge has fallen into oblivion” (TTP 8.1; GIII 117).

GIII 118). However, the sacrilegious manipulation of Scripture has its limits. According to Spinoza, there are certain teachings in Scripture which are so simple to comprehend that it is impossible to dispute their true meaning.<sup>28</sup> Though we only possess a fragmented or corrupted history of the Bible, the intention of the author of Scripture concerning moral teachings is easily accessible. Not only do the moral sayings flow unobstructedly from the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, “the teachings of true piety are expressed in the most familiar words” (TTP 7.68; GIII 111). Indeed, it is the clarity and consistency of the moral teachings that makes them indisputable and distinct from the speculative teachings: “This I can certainly affirm: that I haven’t noticed, concerning moral teachings, any error, or any alternative reading, which could make them obscure or doubtful” (TTP 9.32; GIII 135). Consequently, there can be no dispute as to whether the authors of Scripture had the primary intention to teach “the things salutary and necessary for blessedness” (TTP 7.69; GIII 111).

We now have a general picture of Spinoza’s account of biblical exegesis as presented in the TTP.<sup>29</sup> First, the theologian produces an objective history of Scripture, as thorough and extensive as possible. Second, she infers from this history “what all the Prophets commend in it as an eternal teaching” (TTP 7.27; GIII 102). Third, she moves from this essential knowledge to a more particular and applied knowledge. That is, she moves from the universal teachings of Scripture to the other utterances of prophets so that she may interpret particular teachings which do not have an equally universal appeal. At each of these stages, the interpreter must carefully apply reason to those passages which appear unclear or contradictory in order to ‘unearth,’ as far

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<sup>28</sup> “For things which by their nature are easily grasped can’t be said so obscurely that they aren’t easily understood. As the proverb says: to one who understands a word is enough” (TTP 7.66; GIII 111).

<sup>29</sup> I readily grant that the reading presented so far is rather uncritical towards Spinoza’s self-representation in the TTP. Indeed, commentators have questioned whether Spinoza’s treatment of Scripture (and, by extension, his defense of the autonomy of theology) could actually be seen as successful. Spinoza’s resolution in the TTP to ‘earnestly examine Scripture afresh, with an unprejudiced and free spirit’ should be taken *cum grano salis*. In the end, these commentators maintain, Spinoza simply failed to deliver: his defense of revealed religion is built on too shaky (exegetical) foundations. See especially Zac, *Spinoza et l’interprétation de L’écriture* and Malet, *Le Traité théologico-politique de Spinoza et la pensée biblique*. While I am fully aware of the tensions involved, it is not my intention to fully confront them here. My reflections in the final section of this paper nonetheless provide some food for thought.

as possible, its original signification. What is crucial about the Spinozistic method of Scriptural interpretation is the vital, yet nuanced, role of the natural light; there is a total absence and, in fact, scorn of the use of supernatural light.<sup>30</sup> Although it is possible we may never interpret Scripture in such a way as to make it entirely consistent with reason, the method itself can be applied by all. In the following section, I briefly show how Spinoza's prescription for interpreting the Bible in TTP 7 corresponds to the general methodology of Baconian natural science.

## 2.2 THE BACONIAN FRAMEWORK IN SPINOZA'S EXEGESIS

Spinoza models his method of exegesis on the Baconian method of interpreting nature.<sup>31</sup> According to the latter, the study of nature is composed of two principal phases: first, it ascends gradually from experience systematically arranged and tabulated to general axioms; second, it descends from these axioms to less general particulars. The *Novum Organum*, a work Spinoza knew well,<sup>32</sup> formulates this general scheme as follows: "the true method" commences "with

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<sup>30</sup> Many commentators hold that Spinoza's historical, naturalistic and linguistic approach to canonical exegesis, although belonging to a long tradition of critical styles of interpretation of biblical texts, resulted in an unprecedentedly secular reading of the Bible. E.g. Popkin 'Spinoza and Bible Scholarship', 397; Nadler, *A book forged in hell*, 106-7.

<sup>31</sup> A number of commentators have remarked that Spinoza construes his exegetical method in analogy to Bacon's 'Natural History'. See for instance Zac, *Spinoza et l'interprétation de l'Écriture* 29-36; Savan, 'Spinoza: Scientist and Theorist of Scientific Method', 122 n. 8; Donagan, *Spinoza*, 16-7; Gabbey, 'Spinoza's natural science and methodology', 170; Preuss, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*, 161-7; Rosenthal, 'Spinoza and the philosophy of history', 113-5; Fraenkel, 'Could Spinoza Have Presented the *Ethics* as the True Content of the Bible?', 46; Morrow, *Three Skeptics and the Bible*, 118. For an alternative approach, see Susan James. She notes that Spinoza's *modus operandi* "has much in common with the method of presenting data and arguments that early-modern philosophers call analyses" (*Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics*, 146). This method of inquiry moves from the experience of individual things to definitions and general principles. Although James refers to Bacon and his important discussions of the natural-historical method, she interprets Spinoza's reliance on it primarily within a Cartesian framework: "constructing a history of the Bible is in effect a matter of borrowing the method of analysis integral to Descartes' natural philosophy and applying it to theology." On James's reading, this allowed Spinoza to challenge the idea that the philosophical method of inquiry was completely unable to generate truths which pertain to the realm of theology, a position defended by many Dutch Cartesians. It is interesting to see that the here presented Baconian reading does not contradict, but rather complements James's interpretation. By applying the Baconian natural-historical method to Scripture (integrating the Bible within the canon of civil history), Spinoza could bring home this point even more forcefully.

<sup>32</sup> In a letter to Oldenburg (Ep. 2, 762-3), Spinoza cites various passages from the *Novum Organum*, indicating his familiarity with the work. Spinoza's library, as we have seen, contained a copy of *Sermones Fideles, Ethici, Politici, aconomici: Sive Interiora Rerum. Accedit Faber Fortunae &c.*, a 1641 Latin Edition of



experience duly ordered and digested, not bungling or erratic, and from it educing axioms, and from established axioms again new experiments."<sup>33</sup> Spinoza, as we have seen, based his approach on Bacon's *modus operandi*: "the first thing to be sought from the history of Scripture is what is most universal" (ITP 7.27; GIII 102), and "once we rightly know this universal teaching of Scripture, we must next proceed to other, less universal things" (ITP 7.29; GIII 103). A more detailed look at Spinoza reveals more structural similarities. In *Novum Organum*, Bacon specifically reformulates his scheme as follows:

My directions for the interpretation of nature embrace two generic divisions; the one how to educe and form axioms from experience, the other how to deduce and arrive new experiments from axioms. The former again is divided into three ministrations; a ministration to the sense, a ministration to the memory, and a ministration to the mind or reason. (NO, Works IV, 127)

According to Bacon, the 'contemplative' branch of natural philosophy has three progressive stages. First, a ministration of the sense, i.e. the preparation of a natural and experimental history which lays the foundation of the entire enterprise. The interpreter collects into this history all known instances of the nature investigated. Second, a ministration to the memory, i.e. the constitution of 'Tables and Arrangements of Instances' intended to organize and supplement the collected data. Third, a ministration to the mind, i.e. the application of "true and legitimate induction, which is the very key of interpretation."<sup>34</sup> The interpreter eliminates extraneous material and instances between the various tables which do not exemplify or indicate the essence of the object of study.

Spinoza's specific guidelines for the construction and use of a history of Scripture in the

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Bacon's *Essays* (1625). This edition included material from Book VIII of *De Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623). Although we lack explicit evidence to confirm his familiarity with *De Augmentis* as a whole, it would be unlikely for Spinoza not to have consulted Bacon's magnum opus. Spinoza, after all, clearly had studied Bacon.

<sup>33</sup> NO, Works IV, 81. See also *De Augmentis*: "all true and fruitful Natural Philosophy has a double scale or ladder, ascendant and descendent, ascending from experiments to axioms, and descending from axioms to the investigation of new experiments" (Works IV, 343).

<sup>34</sup> NO, Works IV, 127.

TTP show a remarkable resemblance with the Baconian procedure. First, the interpreter of Scripture collects all the data available that will enable him to construct, as far as possible, a history of Scripture. He gathers all the sayings of each book, and takes into account the nature and properties of the original language as well as the specific historical circumstances of each book. This gathering of data corresponds to Bacon's first step of collecting experiences for further organization and tabulation (*a ministration of the sense*).

Second, the exegete must "organize (the sayings) under main headings so that we can readily find all those concerning the same subject" (TTP 7.16; GIII 100). He constructs a subject index relevant to the specific object of investigation that will facilitate the act of interpreting. The exegete gathers all the sayings from the prophet under exploration, and categorizes them by the content they are concerned with. He, for instance, collects all the utterances of Moses; he moves on to structure the utterances systematically by their topic, for instance, those dealing with Moses's opinion regarding the form of God. This categorization corresponds to Bacon's second methodological step in which he organizes and supplements the gathered data (*a ministration to the memory*).

Third, the exegete applies a method of interpretation grounded in specific rules in order to determine the true opinions of the various prophets, and by extension the historians, regarding the various issues under investigation (*a ministration to the mind*). He applies a linguistic analysis that attends primarily to the literal meaning of utterances. In situations where linguistic usage does not illuminate the meaning of problematic sayings, the interpreter suspends his judgment and accepts the inexplicability of the utterances under scrutiny. At this stage, obscure utterances are set aside and the interpreter remains with 'interpretable' passages. Like Bacon, Spinoza has moved from the giant body of data, collecting it in a specific organizational way, and then using the natural light to parse out those things which are most crucial.

In the following section, I consider one crucial implication of Spinoza's *modus operandi*

in TTP 7. Specifically, I show that Spinoza's application of the Baconian *ars historica* to Scripture results in a total rejection of appeals to the supernatural light in matters of exegesis.

### 2.3 SPINOZA ON SUPERNATURAL INSPIRATION

Our inquiry so far has revealed that Spinoza's apparent reliance on the Protestant hermeneutical principles *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone") and *scriptura sui ipsius interpres* ("Scripture interprets itself") generates rather unorthodox conclusions. This fundamental trend in Reformed orthodoxy holds that Scripture is its own best interpreter. By juxtaposing the obscure with the more straightforward passages, a theologian can give a comprehensive interpretation without leaving the bounds of the text itself.<sup>35</sup> Spinoza would write that the occasions where one can actually rely on other passages to illuminate obscure utterances and teachings are limited. As we have seen, Scripture's fundamental doctrine, which provides the foundation for the various ethical teachings we find in the Bible, is taught with the utmost clarity and consistency. Consequently, interpretative disputes among prophets regarding moral conduct can easily be resolved, whereas speculative teachings and instances where prophets relate miracles and historical narratives lack a common ground that would allow dispute resolution. Additionally, our incomplete knowledge of Scripture's original language and the circumstances of the books in most cases prevent us from grasping the true meaning of an obscure passage by comparison of utterances. All that remains are highly incomprehensible literal meanings of words and stories. Spinoza's conclusion is straightforward: the Bible contains both very clear teachings as well as obscure, contradictory and even totally incomprehensible utterances and precepts; it is a historical-linguistic approach that uses natural light as an invaluable tool that allows us to distinguish between the two.

The reason we can assess the teachings of Scripture as either clear or obscure ultimately depends on our ability to construct objective histories of certain parts of the text. According to

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<sup>35</sup> Luther famously defended the self-interpreting nature of Scripture. See e.g. Mostert, 'Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres: Bemerkungen zum Verständnis der Heiligen Schrift durch Luther', 60-96.

Spinoza, there are, strictly speaking, no inherently obscure parts in Scripture. Theoretically, there is nothing in Scripture that the natural light cannot interpret. The fact that there are many things in Scripture that reason cannot speak to – or, to use Spinoza’s words, that exceed “the limits of our intellect” (*limites nostri intellectus excedunt*; see e.g. TTP 1.7; GIII 16) – relates to the context in which we interpret, which prevents us from having a sufficient objective history of the text which meets the criteria discussed earlier in section I.<sup>36</sup> Spinoza’s message is clear: “the difficulties of interpreting Scripture have not arisen from a defect in the powers of the natural light, but only from the negligence (not to say wickedness) of the men who were indifferent to the history of Scripture while they could still construct it” (TTP 7.73; GIII 112; see also TTP 7.70; GIII 112 and TTP 8.1; GIII 117).

However, if we stay true to the right method, we are able “to discuss the things which surpass our grasp as safely as those we know by the natural light” (TTP 7.8; GIII 98). Indeed, in Spinoza’s opinion this is exactly where a large number of his exegetical predecessors went wrong: instead of concluding that we lack sufficient objective data to adequately grasp the meaning of certain passages, they opt to take refuge to a light beyond reason to make sense of the various incomprehensible statements. They maintain that ‘reason’ (viz. empirical and/or rational methods) do not suffice to interpret Scripture, “but that a supernatural light is most necessary for this” (TTP 7.71; GIII 112). Rather than embracing those things that it teaches with the greatest possible clarity as the teachings of Scripture, they interpret it “in a way that makes it seem as contrary as possible to both reason and nature,” dreaming “that the most profound mysteries lie hidden in the Sacred Texts” (TTP 7.5; GIII 98).

In the TTP, Spinoza withheld from explicitly naming exegetical adversaries who claimed that something ‘supernatural’ is needed to approach and interpret Scripture. Obvious opponents are philosophers and theologians inspired, in one way or another, by Reformed orthodoxy. A

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<sup>36</sup> Harris formulates this as follows: “*Rebus nostris intellectus excedentibus*, concerning which we must consult the Scriptures, are such things as we cannot deduce from first principles because they are either historical or such as lie beyond the scientific and empirical evidence at our disposal” (*The Substance of Spinoza*, 137).

fundamental principle of reformed theology holds that human beings can only fully access the spiritual truths of Scripture through divine illumination, rather than rational contemplation. Calvin, for instance, states that “we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit” (Institutes of the Christian Religion, 78). For these thinkers, only through the operation of the Holy Spirit is it possible for human beings to enter into the true meaning of the biblical writings; moreover, unlike Spinoza, this was a meaning that could not be understood through historical-linguistic analysis alone.<sup>37</sup> Although reformers like Luther and Calvin did not fully reject reason in matters of exegesis, they maintained that only the internal witness of the Holy Spirit can provide the infallible certainty that Scripture is the Word of God (E.g. Voak, ‘Richard Hooker and the Principle of Sola Scriptura’, 98).

Many 17<sup>th</sup> century conservative theologians would carry on this legacy and defend the idea that the Holy Spirit has to illumine before one can have true understanding of the Scriptural content. In his *Disputatio Theologica de iudice et norma fidei* (June 1668), Dutch theologian Gysbertus Voetius argued that “the Holy Spirit is the highest, absolute, infallible judge and interpreter of Scripture.”<sup>38</sup> The notion of supernatural illumination also circulated amongst Dutch Cartesians. Johannes de Raey, the unofficial leader of the group, defended the idea that certain people have a privileged access to the Scriptural content because of a supernatural light.<sup>39</sup> Given the broad spectrum of theologians subject to his critique, Spinoza had good reasons to formulate it as

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<sup>37</sup> For a contemporary example, see Plantinga for whom the interpretation of biblical text through the activity of the Spirit in the individual remains authoritative. He for instance notes: “the fact that it is God who is the principal author here makes it quite possible that we are to learn from the text in question is something rather different from what the human author proposed to teach” (*Knowledge and Christian Belief*, 96).

<sup>38</sup> Quoted from Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy*, 51. Similar to Luther and Calvin, Voetius never fully excluded reason from matters of biblical exegesis; its role, however, was merely instrumental. In the end we always need the help of the Holy Spirit to access the true meaning of Scripture (Ibid., 49, 52).

<sup>39</sup> In the *Keys*, de Raey writes: “God has wished some to have knowledge concerning himself, or his will and counsel, or his works revealed in Scripture, by a special and private grace, and has thus illuminated their minds. And because philosophers have no greater capacity to partake of this illumination than any ordinary person, anybody possessing such knowledge must be said to have drawn it not from human faculties, and not thereby from philosophy, but only to have accepted it from divine grace”. Quoted from Alexander Douglas, *Spinoza’s Vindication of Philosophy*, 117.

generally as possible.

To summarize: Spinoza critiques earlier methods of biblical interpretation that appeal to a supernatural light. The targets of this critique remain unnamed but strongly indicated. This reaction points to one of the most significant distinctions between Spinoza and those in the tradition before him: his naturalistic philosophical system, and therefore his rejection of any appeals to the supernatural in the process of exegesis. This, as we shall see, is a difference found between Spinoza and Bacon as well: insofar as Verulam relies on the concept of illumination to account for the uncovering of a true meaning in Scripture, he too fits the profile of Spinoza's critique in the TTP 7. However, what makes Bacon different from the others who fall victim to Spinoza's critique, as we have seen, is that his system plays an indispensable role in the Spinozistic method of biblical interpretation.

In the following section, I direct attention to Bacon's own discussion of biblical exegesis as presented in *De Augmentis*. We will see that Spinoza's application of the Baconian *ars historica* to Scripture is a direct violation of Bacon's own prescriptions for studying the Bible. According to *De Augmentis*, the Bible should never be treated like any other historical document; a natural-historical inquiry cannot be performed in light of the divine origin and transcendent nature of Scripture's core principles. By modelling his method of exegesis on the Baconian method for interpreting nature, Spinoza in the TTP makes Verulam himself a principal target of his inquiries.

## 2.4 BACON ON BIBLICAL EXEGESIS AND RELIGION (PART ONE)

Bacon's indebtedness to Calvinist theology has been a matter of debate among scholars.<sup>40</sup> In any case, his views on Scriptural interpretation suffer from the shortcomings Spinoza identified, without naming his targets, in the TTP. Similar to reformers like Luther and Calvin, Bacon

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<sup>40</sup> For scholarship on Bacon's influence by the Calvinists, see Matthews, *Apocalypse and Experiment and Theology and Science in the Thought of Francis Bacon*; Milner, 'Francis Bacon: The Theological Foundations of Valerius Terminus', 245-264 and Gascoigne, 'The Religious Thought of Francis Bacon', 209-228.

restricts the use of reason in religion, reserving a prominent place for the notion of divine illumination and perpetuating significant consequences for the method of exegesis. For Bacon, reason, in matters of interpretation, can only take us so far; in a crucial respect the reader of Scripture must depend on ‘divine illumination’ and ‘inspiration’ to acquire a true understanding of the text.

Bacon begins his discussion of ‘Sacred or Inspired Divinity’ with a clear warning: those who enter into the ship of the church “shall step out of the bark of human reason.” The stars of philosophy no longer “supply their light.” (DA, Works V, 111). Sacred theology, Bacon continues, “ought to be derived from the word and oracles of God, and not from the light of nature, or the dictates of reason” (Ibid., 112).

Earlier in *De Augmentis*, Bacon had already discussed ‘natural theology’ or ‘divine philosophy,’ i.e. the study of God “obtained by the light of nature and the contemplation of his creatures”. According to Bacon, it would be mistaken to disregard the power of the natural light in matters of divinity: “that God exists, that he governs the world, that he is supremely powerful, that he is wise and prescient, that he is good, that he is a rewarder, that he is an avenger, that he is an object of adoration - all this may be demonstrated by his works alone”. However, whereas God’s works “do show forth the power and skill of the workman,” they do not portray His image (DA, Works IV, 341). God, in Bacon’s opinion, cannot be identified with the created order. While natural theology can rightfully examine God’s ‘regulations and dispensations over the universe’, it cannot tell us anything about God’s inmost nature.<sup>41</sup> Those who seek a fuller knowledge of the deity must resort to Scripture, since it is there rather than in nature that God

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<sup>41</sup> “If any man shall think by view and inquiry into these sensible and material things, to attain to any light for the revealing of the nature or will of God, he shall dangerously abuse himself” (VT, Works III, 218). Bacon’s claim that from natural reason one cannot infer the inmost nature of God re-emerges in Hobbes (see *Leviathan*, Ch. 31, 239-240) and Newton. In the *General Scolium* to the *Principia*, the latter writes: “We have ideas of his attributes, but we certainly do not know what is the substance of anything. We see only the shapes and colors of bodies, we hear only their sounds, we touch only their external surfaces, we smell only their odors, and we taste their flavors. But there is no direct sense and there are no indirect reflected actions by which we know innermost substances; much less do we have an idea of the substance of God” (91).

reveals his will. For Bacon, only revealed theology can provide positive knowledge of God and serve as the foundation of faith (DA, Works V, 111; see also Gascoigne, 216; Milner, 259).<sup>42</sup>

According to Verulam, the Scriptures are “given by inspiration” (Adv., 294). They express the Will of God and contain a specific kind of knowledge transcending the boundaries of human reason (Gascoigne, 217). Bacon cites Isaiah 8:20: “to the law and to the testimony: if men do not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.” This, Bacon continues, “holds not only in those great mysteries which concern the Deity, the Creation, and the Redemption; but it pertains likewise to a more perfect interpretation of the law moral, ‘love your enemies;’ ‘do good to them that hate you,’ and so on.” The core teachings of religion must be embraced “by a voice beyond the light of nature” (DA, Works V, 112; see also Adv., 289).

Bacon provides some clarification on how to approach this notion of divine inspiration. We must observe, he tells us, that:

the light of nature is used in two several senses; the one, as far as it springs from sense, induction, reason, argument, according to the laws of heaven and earth; the other, as far as it flashes upon the spirit of man by an inward instinct, according to the law of conscience; which is a spark and relic of his primitive and original purity. And in this latter sense chiefly does the soul partake of some light to behold and discern the perfection of the moral law; a light however not altogether clear, but such as suffices rather to reprove the vice in some measure, than to give full information of the duty. So then religion, whether considered with regards to morals or mysteries, depends on revelation from God. (DA, Works V, 113)

Earlier in the text, Bacon already conceded that man “by the light and law of nature” has a notion of virtue and vice, justice and injustice, good and evil (Ibid.). The ‘light of nature’ of which

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<sup>42</sup> Throughout Bacon’s writings there recurs a fundamental distinction: that between God’s power and God’s will. While the former manifests itself in the works of nature and is therefore the subject of philosophy, the latter refers to God’s self-revelation which is found solely in Scripture. The division between philosophy and divinity follows necessarily from the two-fold origin of human learning. The knowledge of man, Bacon tells us, “is as the waters, some descending from above, and some springing from beneath; the one informed by the light of nature, the other inspired by divine revelation” (Adv., 189).



Inspired Theology speaks, Bacon tells us, is of a different order. First, inspiration is characterized as an instinctive awareness of the perfection of the moral law in man's conscience. It is an intuitive, non-deliberative, recognition; one apparently beyond the sensible nature of man and inaccessible to discursive reason. Second, this spark of conscience instills an awareness of duty sufficient to effectuate some kind of moral improvement.<sup>43</sup> However, this light – being “not altogether clear” – does not provide a full understanding of the moral code in question.

Commentators have remarked that Bacon in the above passage provides a rather accurate statement of the Calvinist approach to the medieval doctrine of *synderesis* (E.G. Greene, ‘Synderesis, the Spark of Conscience in the English Renaissance’, 214-5). For the scholastics, the concept of *synderesis* referred more generally to man's postlapsarian recognition of basic moral principles through right reason.<sup>44</sup> Calvinists, however, were careful to emphasize that this ‘natural instinct’ to morality was merely a relic or ‘spark’ of the moral integrity lost at the Fall. They opposed humanistic readings of *synderesis* according to which the ‘spirit of man’ was interpreted as right reason itself, viz. man's natural capacity to recognize and participate in the natural law. Rather than emphasizing the individual's innate capacity as the ground of moral and religious truth, Calvinists tied the ‘spirit of man’ to our capacity to make sense of ‘supersensible’ forms of knowledge imparted to us through divine revelation and grace (Greene, ‘Synderesis, the Spark of Conscience in the English Renaissance’, 195-219; ‘Whichcote’, 617-644). Put differently, for Calvinists, the ‘light of nature’ – here understood as natural reason – was far from sufficient to ground one's obedience towards God: “the supernatural light of grace and illumination was called upon to assist man's otherwise depraved intellect” (Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind*, 128).<sup>45</sup> Bacon's

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<sup>43</sup> Whether this ‘spark’ or ‘instinct’ results in actual behavioral change or merely generates remorse in the recognition that something is sinful remains unclear.

<sup>44</sup> Greene describes it as “a ‘vestige of man's original rectitude ... an innate inclination or habit of the first principles of the practical reason about good and evil. It was the source of infallible natural intuitions of the basic moral principles of the natural law, principles recognized and embraced immediately” (‘Synderesis, the Spark of Conscience in the English Renaissance’, 198; see also his ‘Whichcote’, 619).

<sup>45</sup> Ojankangas describes it as follows: this “foundation of morality, even if it resides in the human soul, is far beyond the sensible nature of man and yet impenetrable also to his discursive reason”. The principles conveyed are of a divine origin (*The Voice of Conscience*, 59).

emphasis on the inadequateness of natural reason, that is, its inability to provide a more ‘perfected’ understanding of Christianity’s core teachings, conforms to this general theme of Reformed theology. It must be “confessed”, he tells us, “that a great part of the moral law is higher than the light of nature can aspire to” (DA, Works V, 113).

In sum, for Bacon, divine inspiration stands at the center of Sacred Theology. Obedience to the divine law should not be seen as a rational affair. On the contrary, the doctrines and mysteries of religion, from a rational point of view, often are incomprehensible, not to say nonsensical. Indeed, “that faith which was accounted to Abraham for righteousness was of such a nature that Sarah laughed at it, who therein was an image of natural reason” (DA, Works V, 112). The core teachings of religion, by consequence, are meant to be accepted primarily on grounds of faith: “The more discordant therefore and incredible the Divine mystery is, the more honour is shown to God in believing it, and the nobler is the victory of faith” (Ibid).

Bacon does not, however, totally exclude the use of “human reason” in Sacred Theology. He identifies two occasions where our rational faculties come into play, be it with severe limitations.<sup>46</sup>

First, people will need to rely on their rational faculties to contemplate the meaning of the revealed mysteries. According to Bacon, this has been made possible by God who accommodated himself to “the weakness of our understanding by so expressing his mysteries that they may be most sensible to us ... and by applying his inspirations to open our understanding” (DA, Works V, 114).<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, however, the ‘grandeur of the mysteries’

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<sup>46</sup> See Adv., 290: “The use of human reason in religion is of two sorts: the former, in the conception and apprehension of the mysteries of God to us revealed; the other, in the inferring and deriving of doctrine and direction thereupon.”

<sup>47</sup> Earlier in *De Augmentis*, Bacon emphasized that the ‘seat’ of divine illumination is the faculty of reason, and not the faculty of the imagination (Works IV, 406; Lancaster, ‘Natural Histories of Religion’, 255). Since the Fall, the human mind no longer is capable of grasping religious truths solely by the understanding. The ‘divine grace’ for this reason “uses the motions of the imagination as an instrument of illumination” (Ibid.). It seeks “access to the mind by similitudes, types, parables, visions, dreams” as a means of communication between divinity and humanity (DA, Works IV, 406). Through the imagination mankind thus is capable of contemplating the mysteries of revelation. Bacon nonetheless stresses that

exceeds the narrowness of the human mind. Bacon repeatedly invokes our fallen condition: the human mind is not “a clear and equal glass,” but an “enchanted” one, inclined to erroneous judgment (Adv., 227). God, moreover, had to speak to men *per verba* in order to accommodate his message to our impure minds. For Bacon, as Lancaster puts it, “The word of God was forever perfect, but the words of men in which it was couched were not” (Lancaster, *The World’s a Bubble*, 174). Many things contained in Scripture, from a rational point of view, remain utterly incomprehensible. The fact that we are epistemologically unequipped to fully grasp the core doctrines of religion for Bacon entails that we cannot question their meaning on rational grounds: “the Christian religion ... excludeth and interdicteth human reason, whether by interpretation or anticipation, from examining or discussing of the mysteries and principles of faith” (VT, Works III, 251). The fundamental principles and mysteries of religion must be exempted from rational inquiry; they can never be affirmed nor denied by the natural light (DA, Works V, 114; see also Adv., 192). Those who “inquire to curiously into the manner of the mystery” fail to understand the crucial limitations of reason in things divine (DA, Works V, 115).

Second, we rely on our rational faculties to infer from these principles of religion doctrines and precepts for living. However, since the core articles of faith are unamenable to reason, we can only “derive and deduce inferences from them according to their analogy” (DA, Works V, 114). Bacon’s point is that theologians should be aware not to attach the same authority to inferences as to the first principles of Scripture revealed by God himself. To illuminate this, Bacon makes a comparison between the study of religion and the study of nature. In natural philosophy, we formulate first principles through the process of induction. The validity of these principles does not rest on authority, it is reason – applied to experience – that makes them indisputable. Moreover, since these first principles have no discordance with reason, we can rationally deduce middle propositions from these first principles that will have the same level of

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divine poesy only allows us to grasp the ‘secrets and mysteries of religion “through a veil” (DA, Works IV, 317). The mind can never genuinely understand or rationally penetrate these revealed truths.

epistemological certainty. This is not the case in religion: “there can be no use of absolute reason”. The first principles are ‘self-existent’ and ‘self-supporting’, their certainty is a matter of divine authority alone. Consequently, the rules of induction do not apply; we must necessarily fall back on syllogistic inferences that can never ensure the same degree of certainty.<sup>48</sup> The various doctrines and tenets formulated on the basis of these indisputable mysteries and first principles are merely probable and always open for dispute (DA, Works V, 115).

Bacon’s reflections on the ‘supplementary’ role of human reason in the domain of inspired theology inform his views on biblical interpretation.

By emphasizing the relative truth-value of inferences and conclusions, Bacon distances himself from the so-called ‘methodical’ approach to Scriptural exegesis exemplified by the Scholastics. According to Bacon, the schoolmen ‘reduced divinity into an art’ by bringing back the content of Scripture mainly to derived propositions, conclusions and commentaries (DA Works V, 116; see also Adv., 293-4). They reduced God’s original message to an artificial system of divisions, expositions, summaries etc., and as a result weakened the foundations of Scripture. As Lancaster puts it, they “had abandoned the oracle of God’s word for the oracle of their own, prideful minds; the same sin that had transformed Lucifer from the *lucem ferre* (the ‘light-bearer’) into the prince of darkness” (*The World’s a Bubble*, 181). For Bacon, grounding a reading of the Bible in human reason or utilizing primarily reason in an understanding of Scripture, one would end up with a problematic propositional interpretation of the text no longer capable of capturing God’s true and original message.

Moreover, the divine origin and transcendent nature of Scripture’s core principles places severe restrictions on so-called ‘free’ approaches to biblical exegeses. Bacon starts by criticizing those who pretend to find truths of natural philosophy in the Bible. He especially targets

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<sup>48</sup> Whether Bacon’s argument is convincing is another matter. It remains difficult to see why the self-existent maxims of religion cannot support the kind of deduction we find in nature (allowing that these axioms are different and have different epistemic status).

‘Cabalists and Paracelsians’ who confusedly mix temporal things with things divine and eternal; instead of honoring the Scriptures they embase and pollute them (DA, Works V, 117). The Bible, a product of revelation, was given as a guide to *spiritual* salvation only: “The scope or purpose of the spirit of God is not to express matters of nature in the Scriptures, otherwise than in passage, and for application to man’s capacity and to matters moral or divine” (Adv., 295). For Bacon, the revealed knowledge about God serves a clear-cut purpose: it is meant to remedy, at least partially, the penal consequences inherited by the human race after the Fall. Specifically, it projects moral imperatives intended to restore mankind’s original state of spiritual innocence. Instances where the Bible treats of natural knowledge are meant only to facilitate the ‘moral’ or ‘divine’ instruction of the reader. Those who seek natural knowledge in Scripture, or, what amounts to the same thing, mix philosophy with faith, therefore ignore the essential context and scope of Scripture.

Bacon’s subsequent critique is directed at those who believe that Scripture can be treated and explained in the same way as human writings (Ibid.); an approach propounded by Spinoza. All efforts to apply to the canonical writings conventional literary methods of interpretation are bound to go astray. The reason for this, Bacon tells us, is straightforward. God, ‘the author of the Scriptures,’ has knowledge of things that infinitely transcends human understanding: “the dictates of Scripture are written to the hearts of men, and comprehend the vicissitudes of all ages; with an eternal and certain foreknowledge of all heresies, contradictions, and differing and changing estates of the Church, as well in general as of the individual elect” (Ibid.; see also Adv., 296). All passages in Scripture, Bacon seems to suggest, are placed there by God in such a manner that they are able to speak to religious men of all ages, providing specific guidance in each socio-historical and theological context.<sup>49</sup> To attribute to passages a fixed and determinate meaning

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<sup>49</sup> In *New Atlantis*, Bacon tells us (referring to the ‘gift of tongues’ related in Acts 2:1-11) that the original inhabitants of the island – “Hebrews, Persians, and Indians, besides the natives” – all were capable of understanding the ‘apostolic and miraculous evangelism of St. Bartholomew’: “everyone read upon the Book and Letter, as if they had been written in his own language” (161). The Bible can be put to political use, regardless of the nation’s particular religious, cultural or ideological stance. See my ‘Christianity in context: Francis Bacon and the New Atlantis’ (unpublished manuscript).

would thereby diminish Scripture's force as an inexhaustible instrument of spiritual guidance. Consequently:

the dictates of Scriptures ... are not to be interpreted only according to the latitude and obvious sense of the place; or with respect to the occasion whereon the words were uttered; or in precise context with the words before or after; or in contemplation of the principal scope of the passage; but we must consider them to have in themselves, not only totally or collectively, but distributively also in clauses and words, infinite springs and streams of doctrines, to water every part of the Church and the souls of the faithful. (DA, Works V, 117)

According to Bacon, this multiplicity – both in meaning and application – renders inadequate all approaches to biblical exegesis grounded on a purely contextual, linguistic or historical analysis of the text. All passages carry in themselves an endless number of possible readings, each of them able to capture 'the divine waters' originating from the well of Scripture.

The authority to interpret Scripture ultimately rests in the consent of the Church (DA, Works V, 116).<sup>50</sup> In the end, the latter has the prerogative to choose between a literal, moral, allegorical or typical interpretation of passages, depending on the particular needs "whereof the church hath most use."<sup>51</sup> However, Bacon advises the theologians of the Church to use their authority with caution. Indeed, he again asserts that it is the excess of positive theology that feeds ecclesiastical controversy and schism.<sup>52</sup> The peace of the Church depends on this reining in of

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<sup>50</sup> Bacon generally defends the Church's right of interpretation as claimed by the English Church: "the Church hath no power over the Scriptures to teach or command anything contrary to the written word, but is as the Ark, wherein the tables of the first testament were kept and preserved; that is the say, the Church hath only the custody and delivery over of the Scriptures committed unto the same; together with the interpretation of them" (*A Confession of Faith*, 111). Given that the English Church derives its authority solely from the British commonwealth, Bacon presents himself as a proto-Hobbesian.

<sup>51</sup> Adv., 296. According to traditional medieval exegesis, biblical passages contain four senses or levels of meaning. To so-called *quadriga* distinguishes between: (1) a literal sense, (2) an allegorical sense intended to reveal more abstruse spiritual meanings, (3) a moral sense intended to convey principles of living and, (4) an anagogical sense dealing with hope and future things to come (see e.g. Harrison, 'The Bible and the Emergence of Modern Science', 119-120).

<sup>52</sup> Bacon often criticizes the tendency within the Roman Church to exceed the limits of ecclesiastical authority. While reflecting on the specific duties of judges, Bacon for instance writes: "Judges ought to remember that their office is *jus dicere*, and not *jus dare*; to interpret law, and not to make law, or give law. Else will it be like the authority claimed by the church of Rome, which under pretext of exposition of

authority so that theologians develop commentary and interpretation on the most fundamental features of the Christian faith. The Church, by Bacon's account, should allow for individual interpretation of matters that do not pertain to the essence of the Christian covenant.<sup>53</sup> In any case, biblical exegesis can only play its role as an instrument of spiritual and moral guidance when it is able to strengthen faith, stimulate unity among Christians and incite in the latter the love of peaceful and charitable actions.<sup>54</sup> Theologians should abstain from constructing prolix commentaries and all-encompassing, all-pervading analyses which only tend to increase religious discordance and turmoil. For Bacon, Scriptural exegesis must preferably model itself on the sermonic activity. The theologian should content himself with "concise ... annotations and observations on particular texts of Scripture ... entirely unconnected" (DA, Works V, 118). A comprehensive, natural-historical analysis in the manner expounded by Spinoza can never be applied to the canon of the Bible.

We have seen that for Bacon, Christianity limits the scope of reason: obedience to the divine law is grounded in revelation and inspiration, not rational decision-making. The doctrines and mysteries contained in Scripture, from a rational point of view, often remain incomprehensible; believe in them, by consequence, is primarily a matter of faithful obedience. Those who read and evaluate Scripture according to traditional standards of truth go utterly astray. Importantly, Bacon not only targets philosophically inclined readers who apply reason to scrutinize biblical content.

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Scripture doth not stick to add and alter; and to pronounce that which they do not find; and by shew of antiquity to introduce novelty" (*Essays*, 446).

<sup>53</sup> "There are some articles, wherein if a man dissent, he is places beyond the pale of the covenant; but that there are others in which he may dissent, and yet remain within it. For the bonds of the Christian communion are set down, 'one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, &c.,' not one Ceremony, one Opinion" (DA, Works V, 115). The same idea appears in the essay 'Of Unity in Religion.' According to Bacon, cohesiveness within the Church will be strengthened when "the points fundamental and of substance in religion were truly discerned and distinguished from points not merely of faith, but of opinion, order, or good intention" (*Essays*, 345).

<sup>54</sup> "that divine state of mind which religion and the Holy faith doth conduct men unto ... [imprints] upon their souls Charity, which is excellently called the bond of Perfection" (Adv., 263). For more on the notion of Charity in Bacon see, for example, Harrison, 'Francis Bacon, Natural Philosophy, and the Cultivation of the Mind.'

His critique is equally directed at theologians who approach the Bible in too ‘methodical’ or ‘liberal’ a manner, without a critical awareness of its sanctioned uses and limitations. Bacon invokes the divine origin and transcendent nature of Scripture’s core principles against the practice of theologians who either (1) embellish biblical doctrine with excessive and superfluous positive theology and speculation, or (2) mistakenly treat Scripture as a source of philosophical knowledge, or (3) attribute, through the application of a historical-linguistic methodology, specific meanings to biblical verses. These interpreters, Bacon tells us, are “inclined to leave the oracle of God’s word and to vanish in the mixture of their own inventions” (Adv., 142). In order to safeguard the essential and original purpose of Scripture – viz. a source of moral inspiration intended for mankind’s spiritual salvation – Bacon advances a method of biblical interpretation that leaves individuals maximal freedom in approaching the text. Although it remains of the utmost importance for the church to provide clarity on the essential tenets of faith, theologians should abstain from ponderous commentaries that attribute to passages fixed and determinate meanings.

Before proceeding, it might be useful to summarize our results to this point. In the TTP, Spinoza models his method of exegesis on the Baconian method of interpreting nature. The construction of a history of Scripture reveals that the Bible contains both very clear teachings as well as obscure, contradictory and even totally incomprehensible utterances. The fact that Scripture contains many things which, from a rational point of view, cannot be understood clearly follows from a lack of data or facts about the texts. Those interpreters who, confronted with these various incomprehensible statements, fall back on a supernatural light ignore this simple empirical truth. According to Spinoza, they end up introducing their own inventions and fancies as divine teaching; a state of affairs that contributes substantially to theological controversy and dissension among men.

Spinoza’s application of the Baconian *ars historica* to Scripture is remarkable to say the least. Spinoza ends up applying the Baconian natural-historical method to a field of inquiry from



which Bacon explicitly excludes it. Bacon, by consequence, falls prey to the same (supernatural) fallacious reasoning Spinoza so ardently opposes in the TTP. Paradoxically, Spinoza's rejection of all appeals to the supernatural in matters of exegesis is a direct consequence of his application of Baconian methodology to Scripture. The previous section also shows that despite conflicting appeals to the supernatural, the gap between both thinkers is not so wide as it may first appear. Both authors argue that Scripture (1) is for the most part is incomprehensible from a rational point of view, (2) cannot be interpreted in such a way as to make it conform with reason, (3) cannot be seen as a source of natural knowledge, and (4) is reducible to a moral teaching. Spinoza and Bacon (5) oppose the excess of positive theology and superfluous speculation; both authors launch a vehement critique against theologians who spoil the original simplicity of the Scriptural message with inessential absurdities and technical jargon (placing restraints on the Church's teaching).

## 2.5 BACON ON BIBLICAL EXEGESIS AND RELIGION (PART TWO)

Bacon's legacy is a complex one.<sup>55</sup> Seventeenth century readers like Spinoza had access to a wide range of Baconian writings; writings that, as we shall see, often reveal a somewhat different image of Bacon than the one presented so far. In what follows, I build on the excellent work of Marta Fattori who reconstructed and published the documents dealing with the insertion of *De*

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<sup>55</sup> Few early modern thinkers have been the subject of such a wide range of opposing interpretations. Jalobeanu writes: "Placed on the threshold between the 'old' and the 'new,' he [Bacon] was successfully pictured as the first of the moderns, the last representative of Renaissance humanism; the father of modern science, and the last representative of a traditional 'esoteric' culture. He was praised for having invented the concept of progress, and criticized for his belief in the possibility of a fundamental restoration of cognitive (and moral) powers lost at the at the Fall. Some scholars stressed Bacon's importance in promoting a new language (and method) of 'science,' while others emphasized Bacon's allegiance to everything the moderns despised (or feared): vitalism, anti-Copernicanism, (natural) magic and alchemy" ('Francis Bacon, Early Modern Baconians, and the Idols of Baconian Scholarship', 5-6). Bacon's religious writings share a similar faith. Penrose describes Bacon's ambiguous reputation as follows: "From one point of view he was the first really great modern moralist; from another he was a contemptible schemer whose ethical advice had been best left unpublished. He was a staunch adherent of the Christian faith, who strengthened the hold of religion on the hearts of men; and he was a damnable atheist whose very effort was aimed at undermining all religion" (Penrose, *The Reputation and Influence of Francis Bacon in the Seventeenth Century*, 1-2).

*Augmentis* in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*.<sup>56</sup> The censorship uniquely shows how (Catholic) contemporaries of Spinoza perceived Bacon's activities in *De Augmentis*, and what they found most troubling for traditional religious discourse. Simultaneously, the censorship provides a helpful framework that will allow us to confront Bacon's more critical reflections on miracles and the supernatural found elsewhere in his writings.

I limit my discussion of *De Augmentis*' condemnation to two recurring critiques particularly relevant to the present discussion. First, the Catholic censors all target Bacon's 'Machiavellianism.' We will see that Bacon not only reiterates Machiavelli's powerful denouncement of church leaders and their disruptive employment of clerical power for personal and political gain, he follows the Florentine in presenting a reinterpretation of Christianity that highlights above all its utility in supporting and maintaining state obedience or, as Bacon puts it, good of communion. Second, all censors unequivocally target Bacon's critical assessment of Church history, in particular his willingness to dismiss unverified ecclesiastical reports of miracles. Bacon warns his readers not to presuppose revelation and the miraculous as the basis of all theological thought and discourse. Miracles are often best explained by their natural causes, religious idolatry and superstition indicate nothing other than an imagination gone astray. We will see that these critiques, from an orthodox point of view, give voice to a broader, overarching concern: Bacon's weakening of the traditional distinction between the sacred and the secular. While Bacon himself never performed a natural history of religion, his writings indicate a powerful, even groundbreaking tendency to apply secular reasoning to matters of the Church.

The 1669 condemnation and insertion in the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* of Bacon's *De Augmentis* was the result of the consultancy work of three Catholic censors, each belonging to a different religious order: the Augustinian Thommaso Noce, the Dominican Giulio Maria Bianchi, and the 'Primate of Ireland' Oliver Plunket. Until the required corrections were made, *De Augmentis* was

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<sup>56</sup> See her 'Vafer Baconus': la storia della censura del *De augmentis scientiarum* and 'Sir Francis Bacon and the Holy Office'.

to be prohibited.

First, all three censors call attention to Bacon's openly declared admiration for Machiavelli.<sup>57</sup> Oliver Plunket, for instance, writes:

On page 23, [Bacon] quotes Machiavelli, whom he often praises, and in particular the passage where he says that the government of priests would have been destroyed long ago if respect for the friars and monks had not compensated for the opulence and excesses of the bishops. These words were said impiously by Machiavelli, who hated the bishops, and above all the Holy Pope, and tended to attribute the survival of the Church to human prudence and not to divine providence. (Fattori, 'Sir Francis Bacon and the Holy Office', 26)

By the time of the condemnation, Machiavelli's reputation as a notorious defender of a new, secular approach to political power was already well established (e.g. Kahn, 'Machiavelli's afterlife and reputation to the eighteenth century', 240).<sup>58</sup> Plunket's description, however, nicely captures the rationale behind it: Machiavelli's deployment of a powerful anti-clerical discourse and, equally important, his attack on the providential structure underlying traditional accounts of Christian history. The success of the Catholic Church, Plunket tells us, is in Machiavelli's opinion no longer a matter of divinely ordained truth, but of human agency only. Put differently: religion, like any other human institution, is subject to the law of mutability; no religion has absolute validity, its success is historically conditioned.<sup>59</sup>

For Machiavelli, practical utility is the primary consideration when dealing with religion.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> There are various explicit references to Machiavelli in Bacon's work. There is, for instance, the famous "we are much beholden to Machiavel and others, that write what men do and not what they ought to do" (Adv., 254). We also have Bacon's praise for Machiavelli's methodological procedure while handling matters of state: "Machiavel choose wisely and aptly for government; namely, discourse upon histories and examples" (Ibid., 453). Although Bacon often expresses his admiration for the Florentine, he never shrinks from pointing out subtle differences in their philosophies. For a helpful overview, see Luciani, 'Bacon and Machiavelli', 26-40.

<sup>58</sup> In 1557, *The Prince* became one of the first books placed on the Roman Catholic Church's Index of Prohibited Books.

<sup>59</sup> See especially *Discourses* II.5 where Machiavelli discusses Christianity as one of a succession of religions with a limited lifespan.

<sup>60</sup> Many scholars have argued that Machiavelli treats religion, whatever its content, instrumentally of functionally, as a tool promoting desirable civil behavior. Proponents of this view include, among others,

He lavishly praises the civil and martial values enshrined by pagan religion, yet criticizes Christianity for glorifying “humble and contemplative more than active men” (*Discourses*, II.2, 131). In Machiavelli’s opinion, Christianity potentially constitutes a direct danger to public liberty and can function as a tool of oppression. The passivity, docility, and idleness Christianity incites in men corrodes the desire for freedom and civility, paving the way for oppression, manipulation, and dominion of the wicked. Bacon was fully aware of this association. In the essay ‘Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature,’ he remarks that “Machiavel, had the confidence to put in writing, almost in plain terms, that ‘the Christian faith had given up good men in prey to those that are tyrannical and unjust.’”<sup>61</sup> Bacon goes on to argue that while Christian charity – the pinnacle of ‘philanthropy’ – is the ultimate good without which “man is a busy, mischievous, wretched thing,” ‘misanthropy’ nonetheless is “the fittest timber to make great politics of” (*Essays*, 363-4; see especially Box, ‘Bacon’s moral philosophy’, 266). For Machiavelli and Bacon alike, conventional Christian morality is often at odds with the requirements of political life. Both authors, in order to make ‘their’ religion a vital component of political action again, interpret Christianity according to an ideal of virtue rather than freedom of earthly toil.

The relationship between moral and civil philosophy seems to have occupied Bacon’s thought throughout the years. In *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), he emphasizes an intrinsic connection between personal virtue and political duty: no man can “understand Virtue without some relation to society, nor Duty without an inward disposition” (*Adv.*, 252). However, in *De Augmentis* – the later Latin translation (1623) – Bacon omits this qualification. He explains that the personal pursuit of virtue often conflicts with the good of others, and therefore should be

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Berlin, ‘The Originality of Machiavelli’, 25-79; Skinner, *Machiavelli*, 61-64; Chabod, *Machiavelli and the Renaissance*, 1-2, 17-18, 93-95, 118-20, 180-91; Hale, *Machiavelli and Renaissance Italy*, 12-13, 16, 73, 195; Preus, ‘Machiavelli’s Functional Analysis of Religion’, 171-90.

<sup>61</sup> For Machiavelli, Christianity shows “the truth and the true way” (*Discourses*, II.2, 131). As it is commonly professed, however, it is unable to promote the necessary esprit de corps and civil valor. Christianity, when properly interpreted, can have a positive effect on politics. See e.g. Colish, ‘Republicanism, Religion, and Machiavelli’s Savonarolan Moment’, 605-8.

distinguished from the duties men have as members of society.<sup>62</sup> Bacon, for instance, invokes the frivolous endeavors of men like Nero and Sylla which were aimed only at their “own power and greatness” and receded “farthest of all from the good of society” (DA, Works V, 12). Moreover, just as the individual private good must be separated from the “good of communion” (i.e. the duties towards one’s fellow citizens and the state), both must be distinguished from the doctrines of politics. The cultivation of virtue and duty concerns solely the government of every man over himself, while politics deal with the government over others.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, the task of the statesman is of a radically different nature: “it is one thing to direct the framing the posts, beams and other parts of the building, and another to join and fasten them” (DA, Works V, 15). *De Augmentis* introduces a clear separation between the principles that instruct individual virtue, public duty, and governmental politics.

Bacon, however, reminds his readers that those principles that help us become more virtuous individuals do not necessarily conflict with those that help us become better citizens. The problem with men like Sylla is that the individual good they aspired to was only an apparent good; they confused the pursuit of virtue with self-love. Christianity, however, revealed that genuine virtue lies in the cultivation of a state of mind that takes humility and good of communion as its principal objects. The Christian faith instructs us to “all acknowledge our minority, and content ourselves with that felicity which rest in hope,” while simultaneously

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<sup>62</sup> Bacon writes: “But here it must be more carefully observed, that this active individual good has no identity with the good of society, though in some case it has an incidence into: for although it many times produces and brings forth acts of beneficence (which is a virtue of communion), yet there is this difference, that these acts are mostly done not with a view to the benefit and happiness of others, but to a man’s own power and greatness” (DA, Works V, 12). Later he specifies that “the term of duty is more proper to a mind well framed and disposed towards others, as the term of virtue is applied to a mind well-formed and composed in itself” (Ibid., 14-5).

<sup>63</sup> In Chapter 2 of Book 8 of *De Augmentis*, Bacon writes: “there is a wisdom of imparting counsel to others, and there is a wisdom of foresight for one’s own fortunes; and these sometimes meet, but oftener sever. For many are wise in their own ways, who yet are weak for government or counsel, like ants, which are wise creatures for themselves, but very hurtful for the garden” (Works V, 57). See also DA, Works V, 15: “The doctrine concerning duty or good off communion may seem at first glance to pertain to science civil and politic, but not if it be well observed, for it concerns the regimen and government of every man over himself, and not over others.” Later, while reflecting on the doctrines concerning so-called respective duty, he adds: “But is must ever be kept in mind, that they are handled, not as they are part of civil society (for that is referred to policy), but as to the framing and predisposing of the minds of particular persons towards the preservation of those bonds of society” (Ibid., 18).

embracing our active duties as members of society. For Bacon, Christianity completely “removed and discharged” all doubt concerning man’s highest good, confirming “charity and infinite feeling of communion” as its *summum bonum* (DA, Works V, 5).<sup>64</sup> By defining Christian values in terms of activity and communal good, Bacon was able to formulate a clear response to the Machiavellian critique of Christianity. According to the latter, grave mistakes had been made by those who have interpreted “our religion” in terms of *laissez faire* (l’ozio). Instead of honoring action and worldly glory, Christianity “glorified humble and contemplative men” (*Discourses*, II.2, 131). This misinterpretation of Christianity’s true potential severely damaged the public good, “for, if they considered how it permits us the exaltation and defense of the fatherland, they would see that it wishes us to love and honor it and to prepare ourselves to be such that we can defend it” (Ibid., 132). Bacon clearly took Machiavelli’s advice to heart.

Machiavelli, as Plunket rightly observes, associates his critique of traditional Christianity mainly with the fraudulent conduct of church leaders and prelates (see, for instance, *Discourses* III.1). Bacon likewise targets the corruption of the papacy and the disruptive employment of clerical power for political purposes. “The Cardinals of Rome”, he writes in the *Essays*, “have a phrase of notable contempt and scorn towards civil business” (*Essays*, ‘Of Vain-Glory’, 443”). The “scandals of priests” (Ibid., ‘Of Atheism’, 372) and “stratagems of prelates for their own ambition and lucre” all contribute substantially to the rise of superstition, “the confusion of many states ... that ravisheth all the spheres of government” (Ibid., ‘Of Superstition’, 373-4).

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<sup>64</sup> For Bacon, the exemplar of the good given to the moral philosopher through Christian faith is definitive because it alone provides the idea within the bounds of human capacity. Christianity once and for all freed mankind of the doctrines ‘of the heathen heaven’ which “imagined a higher elevation of man’s nature than it is really capable of.” It instructs us to “acknowledge our minority, and content ourselves with that felicity which rests in hope” (DA, Works V, 5). Insofar as we acknowledge this failure of the ancients we can still study them with greater clarity for what is useful in their teachings. There remains, after all, much to admire. Not only did the ancient philosophers ‘diligently represent’ and ‘excellently paint’ the various forms of virtue and duty, they were right in identifying the difference between a contemplative and active life, between a life of honesty and profit (DA, Works V, 6). However, their placements of these lives in comparison to each other were not always successful. Epicureans, Stoics, followers of Pyrrho, Epictetus and many other schools all advocated an ideal of felicity that elevated, in one way or another, “private repose and contentment, and not the good of society” (Ibid., 9). Although the ideal of the *vita activa* so admired by Bacon had been defended by an important strand of ancient philosophy, only Christianity provides a perspective that allows ethicists to conclusively determine the superiority of an active life in service of the public good.

Importantly, Bacon never was reluctant to apply the same ‘raison d’état’ to developments within the Church of England. In both his *An Advertisement Touching the controversies of the Church of England* and *Certaine Considerations Touching the Better Pacification and Edification of the Church of England*, Bacon targets the episcopal order, as well as their puritan opponents, for engaging in power struggles and theological controversies that undermine political stability. Bishops and members of the clergy should practice what they preach, for “when virtues in the fathers and leaders of the church have lost their light, and ... wax worldly, ‘lovers of themselves, and pleasers of men’, then men begin to grope for the church as in the dark” (*Advertisement*, 6).<sup>65</sup> Regardless of whether Bacon’s Catholic consultores had knowledge of his activities outside *De Augmentis*, their suspicion of ‘Machiavellianism’ was far from ungrounded.

However, as Fattori points out, “the importance of the Holy Office’s association of Bacon with Machiavelli was not just a question of finding precise comparisons between one and the other, but rather of secularizing a lay vision of social and political life” (‘Sir Francis Bacon and the Holy Office’, 28). Fattori draws particular attention to *De Augmentis*’ classification of the sciences made on the basis of the three faculties of man, namely memory, imagination, and reason.<sup>66</sup> She points out that within this scheme, biblical parables and pagan myths “insofar as their respective genres depend on one of man’s faculties (*imaginatio*)” are reduced to the same level of explanation (*Ibid.*, 30). By doing so, Fattori continues, Bacon undermines the traditional distinction between the sacred and the secular while writing histories: “For Bacon’s consultores, the two levels were worlds apart, one the product of weak and erroneous human efforts, the other divinely inspired” (*Ibid.*, 28). There is much to say for this interpretation. Religious history, viz. the story of God’s provision for the salvation of his chosen people, from an orthodox

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<sup>65</sup> Hahn and Wiker argue that for Machiavelli this “gap between the appearance of holiness and the underlying reality of corruption in the Curia” became the paradigmatic form of princely deception (*Politicizing the Bible*, 144).

<sup>66</sup> Bacon states that “the intellectual process” of the mind relies solely on “these three fountains, Memory, imagination, and Reason.” This, Bacon emphasizes, holds true also within inspired theology: “The information derived from revelation and the information derived from the sense differ no doubt both in the matter and in the manner of conveyance; but the human mind is the same, and its repositories and sells the same” (*DA*, Works IV, 293).

perspective should not be conflated with the chronologies and histories of the gentile nations. Within Bacon's scheme, though, pagan myth and biblical poesy both are presented as instruments of cognitive decoding that rely upon the imagination. In sum, "both the former and the latter (historical and theological narrations, and hence the parables) needed verification" (Ibid., 30).

Fattori's reading suggests that in Bacon, religious sentiments produced by divine poesy – viz. biblical parables, similitudes, visions, dreams etc. – are explained in terms of the working of the imagination. In this fashion Bacon places emphasis on the psychological, naturalistic mechanism underlying the religious phenomenon, rather than on any supernatural element involved. For the reader of Bacon's *Essays* and *Sylva Sylvarum* this indeed may seem a warranted conclusion. James Lancaster, who particularly studied the question to what extent Bacon himself ever undertook a natural history of religion, concludes that at least false religion is consistently explained in terms of the imagination. Bacon praises the imagination as a powerful tool that allows mankind to 'raise and erect the mind,' yet simultaneously stresses its tendency to produce all kinds of superstition and idolatry. He explains how people, especially in times of uncertainty and distress,<sup>67</sup> all too often are convinced of the supernatural character of ceremonies, charms, seals, ointments, and incantations, when in fact this belief points to nothing more than an imagination led astray (Lancaster, 'Natural Histories of Religion', 257).<sup>68</sup> Bacon, moreover, identifies the credulity of men as a principal source of clerical abuse of power. He confesses that "it was a notable observation of a wise father ... that 'those which held and persuaded pressure of consciences, were commonly interested therein themselves for their own end'" (*Essays*, 'Of Unity in Religion', 347).<sup>69</sup> In sum, Bacon warns his readers not to presuppose revelation and the miraculous as the basis of all theological thought and discourse.

Lancaster, however, stresses that while "superstition and idolatry might thus be

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<sup>67</sup> For Bacon's association of superstition with fear and uncertainty (a recurring theme in the work of Hobbes, Spinoza, and Hume) see for instance Bacon's fable of Pan (*De Sapientia Veterum*, Works VI, 712) and the essay 'Of Death' (*Essays*, 343).

<sup>68</sup> E.g. *Sylva Sylvarum*, Works II, 657.

<sup>69</sup> On the imagination and its use as a mechanism for deploying and maintaining authority, see Butler, *Imagination and Politics in Seventeenth-century England*, 17-54.



considered natural - in the sense that they arose from the mind's corrupted dispositions - Bacon's view of true religion was that it was clearly grounded in the supernatural" ('Natural Histories of Religion', 254). While Bacon may reduce false religion to the workings of a debauched imagination, *vera religio* itself is always described in terms of revelation and inspiration. Indeed, Bacon never went so far as to reduce all religion, or religion as such, to the imagination. His remarkable assertion in *De Augmentis* that the 'seat' of divine illumination is the faculty of reason, and not the faculty of the imagination (DA, Works IV, 406) perhaps is meant precisely to guard readers like Fattori against drawing too hasty conclusions. Regardless, as Paolo Rossi concludes, Bacon at least "came closer to a view which represents a turning point in the development of European thought, namely, the thesis that the origin of religions lies in the imagination" (*Francis Bacon: from Magic to Science*, 149). In sum, while Bacon himself never undertook a history of religion, his naturalistic explanation of superstition and religious idolatry still presented an important starting point for further exploration.<sup>70</sup>

The second issue for Bacon's Catholic consultores was his willingness to apply, at least to some extent, natural-historical reasoning to matters of religion. In addition to Bacon's Machiavellianism, all three censors unequivocally target Bacon's critical assessment of traditional Church history. The Dominican Giulio Bianchi formulates this as follows:

[Bacon] errs where he explains that the requisites of the truth of history have nothing to do with sincerity. He insinuates that much damage has been done to the history of the Church when miracles have been narrated by Martyrs, Hermits and Anchorites, and by other saintly people, founded on relics, sepulchers, sarcophagi or images. In this case he proceeds without making the necessary distinctions or recognizing limits, with the result that the superficiality of a few Authors renders suspicious the whole history of the Church. This is said quite openly ... when he distinguishes the parts of the history of the Church according to the varying states of the Church during moments of persecution, in war and in peace. This is something about which he claims that much has been written –

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<sup>70</sup> Hume, arguably the proponent of a natural history of religion, praises Bacon for his pioneering work in the establishment of a new 'science of man'. Hume was not alone in this assessment. See Wood ('The Science of Man', 197-210) for an interesting overview of Baconian influences on later figures.

and he adds these words: "I only wish that the goodness and the sincerity of these stories were matched by an adequate quantity of material". Here we see the crafty heretic cautiously insinuating his heresies. (Fattori, 'Sir Francis Bacon and the Holy Office', 46)

As we have seen, Bacon's discussion of scriptural exegesis in *De Augmentis* manifestly excludes the application of the natural-historical method to Scripture. Other passages in the book, however, indicate that inductive reasoning should not be totally abandoned when dealing with matters of the church. Bacon goes so far as to assert that the natural-historical method for obtaining knowledge, i.e. the activity of compiling particular histories which provide "the stuff and subject matter of true induction" (DA, Works IV, 254) encompasses all branches of human learning. The *ars historica* can be applied both to the study of the "deeds and works of nature" as to "those of men" and "divinity" (Ibid., 293-4). True to this conviction, Bacon subsumes ecclesiastical history under the category of civil history, indicating his preference to apply to matters of the church the same method of inquiry as, for instance, to the history of politics.<sup>71</sup>

Bacon, however, carefully delineates the subject-matter and scope of 'Sacred history.' He distinguishes three specific branches: (i) a 'History of Prophecy' dealing with prophecies and their accomplishment in the temporal word, (ii) a 'History of Divine Judgments or Providence' concerned with manifestations of God's divine plan, and (iii) 'Ecclesiastical History Special' or Church history describing "the state of the Church in persecution, in remove, and in peace" (DA, Works IV, 312-3). To be clear, Bacon never advocates a history of religion that critically examines the foundations of the Bible. The historical method, however, can be applied to the above mentioned offices of ecclesiastical history.

Bacon's move here is far from trivial. To engage in sacred history, from an orthodox perspective, is to investigate the providence of God in world history. The history of the Judeo-Christian religion, a history uniquely validated by divine revelations and mysteries, is approached

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<sup>71</sup> In the *Advancement of Learning*, Bacon distinguishes between four kinds of history, i.e. natural, civil, ecclesiastical and literary. In the later *De Augmentis*, ecclesiastical history becomes part of civil history. See also Nadel, 'History as Psychology in Francis Bacon's Theory of History'; Lancaster, 'Natural Histories of Religion'.

and explained with causal principles different from those applied to secular events. Put differently, the primary task of those engaged in divine historiography was not to discover truth as such but to reveal how God works his will throughout time. Events were understood not simply as the effect of proceeding conditions or human actions, but of divine governance only. As Breisach points out, “the modern concept of history as a chain of causes and effects, where a given state of affairs results necessarily from its antecedents, was in general foreign” to traditional religious historiography. Truth “sprang not from a detached establishing of neutral facts but from a devout look at the past in the interest of faith” (*Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 127). Bacon’s Machiavellian tendencies again assert themselves.

In his subsequent discussion of these three branches of ecclesiastical history, Bacon is particularly critical of so-called ‘Ecclesiastical History Special.’ He targets the existing practice of ecclesiastical historians and writes that he finds in it “no deficiency but rather superfluities” (DA, Works IV, 312). For Bacon, the problem with ecclesiastical history is not so much quantity but quality. Although he would abstain from further comment, his consultores were quite aware of the implications. For good reasons, they refer to Bacon’s discussion of the credulous, even malicious reporting of miracles by Church historians found elsewhere in his writings.<sup>72</sup>

Bacon’s treatment of miracles has been the subject of much scholarly debate. What matters here is his willingness to apply to theological narrations about miracles the same methodological scrutiny commonly associated with Baconian natural history. This becomes particularly clear in *Novum Organum* where Bacon argues that miracles, like any other natural phenomenon, should be examined to see if they conform to any “common form” or pattern

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<sup>72</sup> Bacon’s *consultores* refer to the following passage: “we see the experience and inconvenience of this error in ecclesiastical history; which hath too easily received and registered reports and narrations of miracles wrought by martyrs, hermits, or monks of the desert, and other holy men, and their relics, shrines, chapels, and images: which though they had a passage for a time by the ignorance of the people, the superstitious simplicity of some and the politic toleration of others holding them but as divine poesies, yet after a period of time, when the mist began to clear up, they grew to be esteemed but as old wives’ fables, impostures of the clergy, illusions of spirits, and badges of Antichrist, to the great scandal and detriment of religion” (Adv., 142).

(NO, OFB XI, 297).<sup>73</sup> The suggestion that miracles can be reduced to a predictable order, as Gascoigne points out, of course, “comes close to explaining them away” (‘The Religious Thought of Francis Bacon’, 221). Bacon, however, never went so far as to attribute all miracles to natural causes. His primary concern was with distinguishing biblical miracles from the bulk of post-Apostolic prodigies authenticated by the Catholic Church. Whereas Christians relied on ‘modern’ miracles as ongoing evidence of their legitimate possession of apostolic authority, Protestants referred the age of miracles to the past (Dear, ‘Miracles, Experiments, and the Ordinary Course of Nature’, 670; Renaker, ‘A Miracle of Engineering: The Conversion of Bensalem in Francis Bacon’s ‘New Atlantis’’, 181-193). The management of miracles, in other words, had severe political implications. By criticizing the overabundance, even feigned nature, of many miracles narrated by Church historians Bacon submits himself to the accepted position of the Elizabethan Church of England. Bacon’s treatment of miracles is significant for at least two reasons. First, it reveals Bacon’s willingness to apply natural-historical reasoning to matters of religion. Similar to his treatment of superstition and idolatry, Bacon sees it fit to sometimes attribute natural causes to miracles. Second, it again confronts us with Bacon’s ‘Machiavellianism’: religion should play a supportive but nonetheless subordinate role in the government of states. Narrations of miracles that undermine the authority of the state, Bacon suggests, should not go unchallenged.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> See also *Parasceve*, Works IV, 255: “all superstitious stories (I do not say stories of prodigies, when the report appears to be faithful and probable; but superstitious stories) and experiments of ceremonial magic should be altogether rejected. For I would not have the infancy of philosophy, to which natural history is as a nursing-mother, accustomed to old wives’ fables. The time will perhaps come (after we have gone somewhat deeper into the investigation of nature) for a light review of things of this kind ; that if there remain any grains of natural virtue in these dregs, they may be extracted and laid up for use. In the meantime they should be set aside”.

<sup>74</sup> The political governance of miracles for legitimizing and bolstering authority resonates most clearly in *New Atlantis*. Bacon there tells the story of Bensalem’s conversion to Christianity following the miraculous appearance of a ‘great pillar of light’ revealing an ark containing the Bible. Bacon’s treatment of this miracle is highly suspicious. Salomon’s House, the scientific and arguably political elite of the island not only is responsible for authenticating the miracle, it has at its disposal all technical means to create or fabricate the very event. Bacon writes: “we have also houses of deceits of the senses, where we represent all manner of feats of juggling, false apparitions, impostures, and illusions; and their fallacies. And surely you will easily believe that we that have so many things truly natural which induce admiration, could in a world of particulars deceive the senses, if we would disguise those things and labour to make them seem

This brief examination of *De Augmentis*' condemnation by the Catholic Church has allowed us to place Bacon's activities when dealing with religion in a more nuanced light. Three conclusions stand out. First, while Bacon himself never performed a natural history of religion, his writings indicate a powerful, even groundbreaking, tendency to apply secular reasoning to matters of divinity. *De Augmentis*' admission that the *ars historica*, at least principally, can be applied to matters of religion gains in importance when one takes into account Bacon's emphasis on the collaborative, ongoing nature of his proposed grand renewal of learning. For Bacon, "truth is rightly called the daughter not of authority but of time" (NO, OFBXI, 133). From this point of view, Spinoza in the TTP can be read as taking Bacon's claim for the universal application of the natural-historical method to its logical conclusion.

Second, for Bacon – echoing Machiavelli – religion should be accommodated to the needs of the state. While Bacon, through an emphasis on charity and good of communion, presents an interpretation of Christianity that highlights its value for state politics, his writings simultaneously show an acute awareness of the corruptible nature of religion and the detrimental societal effects that accompany superstition and idolatry. Although he never went so far as to identify all aspects of the religious phenomenon with the imagination, his writings demonstrate that this faculty of the mind must be vigorously attended by those in power precisely because it has such a strong role to play in defining belief and authority. Spinoza, we can assume, would not be deaf to Bacon's overall conception that the imagination is a force which could gain and maintain political power if harnessed correctly.

Third, Bacon himself never intended to fully naturalize religious belief. While he arguably had at his disposal the philosophical tools needed to demystify the notions of miracle and divine

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more miraculous". (*New Atlantis*, 183). On this reading, Bensalem's miraculous conversion turns out to be a mere political fabrication skillfully implemented by the island's ruling class. Whether Bacon himself approves of such a *modus operandi* remains debatable. Unlike Machiavelli (see especially Graham Hammill, *The Mosaic Constitution*, p. 39 & 45), Bacon never openly states that revelation is a political strategy aimed at producing obedience through the ruses of belief. Still, his writings do suggest that it is at least politically expedient to claim the rhetoric of revelation. At any rate, the employment of miracles for the sake of instilling obedience is a matter of human policy only, for "God never wrought miracle to convince atheism, because his ordinary works convince it" (*Essays*, 'Of Atheism', 371).

illumination, both categories remain firmly upheld. Bacon's motivation for not taking the proverbial final step remains to be debated. Our inquiries in Section 2.4, however, show that Bacon's appeal to the supernatural comprises more than mere lip service to theological orthodoxy. By grounding a reading and understanding of Scripture in the supernatural, Bacon was capable of introducing a radical demarcation between inspired theology and other fields of inquiry; a demarcation that would allow him to defend points 1-5 mentioned at the end of the previous section.<sup>75</sup> Bacon's appeal to the supernatural thus provided a powerful medicine against the false aspirations of theologians who either embellish biblical doctrine with excessive positive theology or treat Scripture itself as a source of philosophical knowledge. In Bacon's opinion, both elements – viz. the overabundance of positive theology, and the misinterpretation of Scripture's purpose (moral guidance rather than scientific education) – only generate controversy among the faithful, and what amounts to the same thing, political division. Spinoza, again, would agree with Bacon.<sup>76</sup> However, despite these shared commitments, Spinoza did not find Bacon's approach appealing at all. The introduction of a supernatural light for him is part of the problem, not a prudent solution.

## 2.6 THE TTP ON MIRACLES: A BACONIAN READING

Our previous assessments confirm that Spinoza had good reasons for placing his own activities in TTP 7 within a Baconian framework. Spinoza in the TTP not only defends a number of crucial claims about Scripture also advanced by Bacon, the latter's program provides an ideal starting

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<sup>75</sup> Recall that for Bacon, Scripture (1) is for the most part is incomprehensible from a rational point of view, (2) cannot be interpreted in such a way as to make it conform with reason, (3) cannot be seen as a source of natural knowledge, and (4) is reducible to a moral teaching. Bacon, moreover, (5) opposes the excess of positive theology and superfluous speculation that has clouded the original simplicity of the biblical message.

<sup>76</sup> The TTP identifies the search for the true meaning of Scripture as one of its principal goals. Its aim is to show that the Bible is an instrument of obedience, and not a source of philosophical truth. By doing so, the TTP intends to secure the separation of the domains of philosophy and religion so that philosophers no longer are restrained in their search for truth by ecclesiastic authority. This separation also discredits the practice of theologians who bedeck religion with philosophical speculation.

point for a reading of Scripture fully grounded in natural-historical reasoning. Simultaneously, Spinoza's appeal to Baconian methodology allowed him to highlight the fundamental contrast between himself and Bacon: his application of the Baconian *ars historica* to Scripture, or, what amounts to the same thing, his willingness to unambiguously treat the Bible as any other historical document.<sup>77</sup>

In the previous chapter, we have seen that Bacon identifies civil history as the branch of learning particularly capable of providing vivid and realistic depictions of the human condition. Works of civil history offer a detailed description of men's characters, deeds, vices, and intentions as revealed by their interaction with specific personalities and events; descriptions that allow the readers to infer from the reported facts their own moral and political observations. Spinoza, as we have seen, concurs with Bacon. What makes Spinoza different from Bacon is that he unequivocally includes the Bible itself within the canon of civil history. He writes:

reading them [viz. the historical narratives of Scripture] is very useful in relation to civil life. For the more we have observed and the better we know the customs and characters of men – which can best be known from their actions – the more cautiously we will be able to live among them and the better we will be able to accommodate our actions and lives to their mentality (TTP 4.10; GIII 61-2)

In sum, Spinoza explicitly attributes to Scripture the same value commonly assigned by Bacon to civil history. The Bible, like any other instance of civil history, is an excellent source of behavioural knowledge capable of wielding political readings. The implications of this move are far-reaching: Spinoza advocates a reading of Scripture that urges one to investigate, and politically assess, the actions and intentions of its authors and leading characters.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Recall that according to Bacon the “divinely-inspired Scriptures” should never be “explained in the same way as human writings” (DA, Works V, 117).

<sup>78</sup> As we have seen, Spinoza repeatedly speaks of ‘the authors’ of Scripture. It should be noted, however, that the TTP also indicates that the extant texts of the Pentateuch were not written by Moses, but by the scribe Ezra (see, for instance, TTP 8.27; GIII 123; Rudavsky, ‘The science of Scripture: Abraham Ibn Erza and Spinoza on biblical hermeneutics’, 76). Spinoza's identification of Ezra as editorialist undercuts the idea of earlier authors. While there is much more to be said on this issue (something I hope to

Spinoza follows in Machiavelli's footsteps. One notorious implication of Machiavelli's treatment of religion was that the Bible is no longer exempt from a political reading; it too could yield the reasons for human actions, or, as he himself puts it, reveal "the causes of the hatreds and factional struggles" within political bodies (quoted from Geerken, 'Machiavelli's Moses and Renaissance Politics', 580). Scripture contains insights about law, sovereignty, and the genesis and corruption of states; its narratives when properly examined disclose valuable tools for forming and conceptualizing the political subject. Machiavelli's famous assessment of Moses – a charismatic 'armed prophet' who skilfully instrumentalized religious belief in order to legitimize worldly authority – nicely exemplifies this approach. Moses's activities reveal that successful political authority above all manifests itself in a ruler's capacity to regulate the beliefs of his subjects, using violent means if needed. For Machiavelli, the Mosaic constitution provides a powerful model by which to explain and explore particular forms of sovereignty.<sup>79</sup>

Spinoza's own analysis of Mosaic authority will be addressed later on in this dissertation (see Chapter 5, sections 1 and 2). What matters here is that Spinoza's rejection of all appeals to a supernatural light in matters of exegesis follows directly from his treatment of the Bible as a product of civil history. Spinoza emphasizes that in order to arrive at a sufficient understanding of Scripture – a human artefact produced through a complex history of writing, editing, and canonization – interpreters need to recognize and take into account the process of transmission and editing of the text, as well as the intentions and biases of the authors involved. The outcome of this approach is revealing: Spinoza rejects theology's reliance on inspiration as a necessary requisite for a true understanding of Scripture as mere opportunities for priestcraft; the product of "negligence not to say wickedness of those men who were indifferent to the History of Scripture" (TTP 7.73; GIII 112).

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examine more closely in future research), Spinoza's attitude here confirms our general observation: the TTP shifts the Bible (in casu the Torah) from a divinely authored book to a work of civil history.

<sup>79</sup> In Machiavelli's wake, the Mosaic constitution and political Hebraism more generally became a popular topic for exploring the politics of the early modern state. We can think of Grotius' *De Republica Emendanda* (c. 1600), Cunaeus' *De Republica Hebraeorum* (1617), Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and Spinoza's TTP. See, for instance, Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic* and Hammill, *The Mosaic Constitution*.



Spinoza, we can assume, would not include Bacon within the category of theologians responsible for this detrimental state of affairs. The point, however, remains: by integrating Scripture within the canon of civil history – identifying it as a product of human industry subject to historical manipulation and corruption – Spinoza presents a reading of Scripture capable of dismissing all appeals to supernatural illumination.

Spinoza's integration of Scripture within the canon of civil history also entails significant consequences for our understanding of miracles as related in Scripture. By a similar line of reasoning it is shown that the common understanding of miracles – as interruptions or contraventions of the order of nature – too finds little biblical support. Spinoza claims that “nowhere does [Scripture] teach that anything happens in nature which is contrary to its laws, or which cannot follow from them. So these things ought not to be fictitiously ascribed to Scripture” (TTP 6.69; GIII 96-7). The TTP does not stop here. Spinoza adds that “if anything should be found [in Scripture] which can be conclusively demonstrated to be contrary to the laws of nature, or to have been unable to follow from them, we must believe without reservation that it has been added to the Sacred Texts by sacrilegious men” (TTP 6.51; GIII 91). This, as Nadler points out, is strange indeed:

Given everything Spinoza has said about the authors of Scripture - who, to repeat, were not learned philosophers, much less Spinozists –why should we believe that they *could not* teach a superstitious account of miracles, that any such message would have to have been inserted by an impious and sacrilegious forger? (Nadler, ‘Scripture and Truth: A Problem in Spinoza’s Tractatus Theologico-Politicus’, 638)

Confronted with this interpretive puzzle, Nadler introduces a helpful distinction between (1) the phenomenon as experienced by the biblical author, (2) the interpretation of this phenomenon by the author, and (3) the true cause of the phenomenon. When Spinoza writes that nothing can be found in Scripture “which can be conclusively demonstrated to be contrary to the laws of nature” (TTP 6.51; GIII 91) this does not imply that we will never find interpretations in the Bible that

attribute to events supernatural causes. Rather, what Spinoza has in mind is that these interpretations “are always a function of the beliefs and preconceptions of the author” (Nadler, ‘Scripture and Truth: A Problem in Spinoza’s Tractatus Theologico-Politicus’, 640). Indeed, many of the biblical authors undoubtedly were convinced of the supernatural character of events. What Spinoza’s assertion does imply, Nadler continues, is that “in Scripture we will never find the narration of something occurring in an individual’s experience for which there is not, in fact, a natural explanation” (Ibid., 641). Now, according to Nadler, this interpretation does not appear to solve all difficulties. He concludes his essay with the remark that it is still a ‘mystery’ why Spinoza believes “that as a matter of fact Scripture itself – or, rather, its prophetic authors – when properly interpreted does in fact ascribe natural causes to all events, even those it presents as miracles” (Ibid., 642).

Spinoza’s remarkable claim becomes less enigmatic when explained in reference to his treatment of the Bible as a product of civil history. Spinoza spells out the consequences of a historical approach to Scripture whose primary intention is to discover the ‘mind of Scripture’s authors’ (*mentem auctorum scripturae*).<sup>80</sup> This latter category must be broadly interpreted: scribal errors and intentional changes during the history of textual transmission are taken into account. Consider the following statement:

*Partly because of religion and partly because of preconceived opinions they conceived and recounted the affair far differently than it really could have happened. Therefore, to interpret the miracles in Scripture and to understand from the narrations of them how they really happened, it is necessary to know the opinions of those who first narrated them and those who left them to us in writing and to distinguish those opinions from what the senses could have represented to them. Otherwise we’ll confuse their opinions and judgments with the miracle itself, as it really happened (TTP 6.56; GIII 92; emphasis mine).*

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<sup>80</sup> Recall TTP 7.7-8; GIII 98: “to interpret Scripture it is necessary to prepare a straightforward history of Scripture and to infer from it the mind of Scripture’s authors, by legitimate inferences, as from certain data and principles. For in this way everyone – provided he has admitted no other principles or data for interpreting Scripture and discussing it than those drawn from Scripture itself and its history – everyone will always proceed without danger of error. He will be able to discuss the things which surpass our grasp as safely as those we know by the natural light.”

Spinoza tells us that some of the authors attributed supernatural causes to natural events because of ignorance,<sup>81</sup> while others retained supernatural language only to instill devotion in their audience. This latter point should not surprise us: “the purpose of Scripture is not to teach things through their natural causes, but only to relate those things which fill the imagination, and to do this by that Method and style which serves best to increase wonder at things” (TTP 6.44; GIII 90). For Spinoza, the issue is rather that the long interpretive process in the transmission of biblical texts no longer allows us to properly differentiate between the opinions of the ‘original’ authors – viz. the subjective experience of the prophets, apostles and other protagonists – and the opinions of those involved in the complex process of transmission. Spinoza writes:

It is quite rare for men to relate a thing simply, just as it happened, without mixing any of their own Judgment into the narration. Indeed, when they see or hear something new, unless they take great precautions against their preconceived opinions, they will, for the most part, be so preoccupied with them that they will perceive something completely different from what they see or hear has happened, particularly if the thing which has been done surpasses the grasp of the narrator or the audience, and especially if it makes a difference to his affairs that the thing should happen in a certain way. That's why in their Chronicles and histories men relate their own opinions more than the events they're reporting, and why two men who have different opinions relate one and the same event so differently that they seem to be speaking about two events, and finally, why it is often not very difficult to find out the opinions of the Chronicler and historian just from their histories. If I did not think it would be superfluous, I could cite many examples to confirm this, both from Philosophers who have written the history of nature, and from Chroniclers. (TTP 6.53; GIII 91-2)

In our study of the Bible, all interpretative difficulties commonly associated with the study of historical texts must be taken into account. That is, difficulties which relate to words, discourse,

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<sup>81</sup> See TTP 6.56; GIII 92-3: “It's important to know their opinions not only for these purposes, but also so that we do not confuse the things which really happened with imaginary things, which were only Prophetic representations. For many things are related in Scripture as real, and were even believed to be real, which were, nevertheless, only representations and imaginary things.”

and the transmission of knowledge apply as much to the Bible as to any other chronicle or historical document. Spinoza's point is ingenious: the awareness that our knowledge of historical texts is always shaped by the transmissive means through which it is developed, organized, and passed on is a Baconian theme par excellence, as will be shown next.

Chapter IV of Book VI of *De Augmentis* deals specifically with the 'critical and pedagogical' complexities related to the transmission of knowledge and the reading of books. Bacon warns his readers that "the most corrected copies are often the least correct" (DA, Works IV, 491). We read and study books through the lenses of teachers and traditions, yet the work of editors, annotators, commentators, and interpreters often results in a corruption of the original message: "the rash diligence of some has done no little harm" (Ibid.). While it would lead us astray to fully confront Bacon's reflections dealing with the transmission of knowledge, one consideration deserves particular attention. Confronted with the fact that most editors and annotators of texts conflate their own opinions with those of the original authors, Bacon makes the following suggestion: "it were especially to be desired ... that every writer who handles arguments of the obscurer and more important kind, should himself subjoin his own explanations; that so the text may not be interrupted by digressions and expositions, and the notes be not at variance with the writers' meaning (Ibid., 494).

In sum, Spinoza in the TTP reformulates the very same worry advanced by Bacon in *De Augmentis*: our reading and understanding of historical documents often is biased as a consequence of the operation of historical forces on their preservation and diffusion. Bacon, as we should expect by now, is careful enough not to include the Bible into his considerations: he illustrates his points using a passage from Tacitus' *Historiae*. Spinoza, by contrast, unambiguously applies the same line of thought to Scripture. For him, the Bible forms an integral part of the canon of civil history; the same methodological considerations apply.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, authors like Tacitus and Lipsius had raised similar concerns related to the transmission of knowledge. One final point must be

addressed in order to show that Bacon presents himself as Spinoza's most likely intellectual sparring partner in these matters. Commentators have remarked that the above mentioned passages – viz. where Spinoza argues that biblical narrations of supernatural events, when properly interpreted, in fact always presuppose natural causes – present troubling questions regarding Spinoza's views in the TTP on the interpretation of Scripture. The goal of Spinoza's method of exegesis was to avoid twisting “the meaning of Scripture according to the dictates of our own reason and according to our own preconceived opinions” (TTP 7.22; GIII 101). Spinoza's own metaphysics – viz. the idea that it is impossible for anything to happen that is contrary to or above Nature – nonetheless seems to influence his reading of the lessons of Scripture. This indeed might be the case. However, commentators tend to ignore Spinoza's own awareness of the tension involved. Spinoza, nearing the end of Chapter 6, adds specifically that his discussion of miracles proceeded “according to a method completely different” from the one followed elsewhere in the TTP (TTP 6.65; GIII 94). Indeed, the major part of Spinoza's discussion of miracles in Chapter 6 centers around a purely philosophical argument in favor of the overall conclusion that all events related in Scripture, including miracles, must have happened according to the common order of nature. Spinoza, however, is fully aware that his *modus operandi* conflicts with his own prescriptions for interpreting the Bible: when “I've elicited the main points only from principles known to the natural light. I did this deliberately” (TTP 6.65; GIII 95). To silence his critics, he goes on to show that his conclusion can equally be upheld using a methodological procedure that admits no other principles or data for interpreting Scripture than those drawn from Scripture itself and its history (the ‘theological’ procedure discussed earlier in this section). In sum, Spinoza in Chapter 6 shows that his overall conclusion can be defended using two very different methodological procedures: either through the construction of a history of miracles (emphasizing the various complexities related to the transmission of knowledge), or through the use of philosophical arguments.

Regardless of whether one finds Spinoza's response satisfactory, his procedure is both

witty and well-conceived. Let us briefly consider Spinoza's proposed philosophical argument. In a nutshell: Spinoza argues that miracles do not provide insight into "God's essence, nor his existence, nor his providence, but that on the contrary these things are better perceived from the fixed and immutable order of nature" (TTP 6.16; GIII 84). Miracles do not show us the existence of God, on the contrary, "they would make us doubt his existence" (TTP 6.19; GIII 85). Belief in them, Spinoza continues, "would make us doubt everything and would lead to Atheism" (TTP 6.28; GIII 87). Spinoza's philosophical claim is a clear reformulation of an argument advanced by Bacon throughout his various writings. Consider the following well-known passage from 'Of Atheism':

God never wrought miracle to convince atheism, because his ordinary works convince it. It is true that a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about the religion. For while the mind of man looketh upon second causes scattered, it may sometimes rest in them, and go no further, but when it beholdeth the chain of them, confederate and linked together, it must needs fly to Providence and Deity. (*Essays*, 371)

A similar line of thought is found in *Novum Organum*:

But if we take the matter rightly, natural philosophy after the Word of God is the best medicine for superstition and **most** highly **recommended** food for faith. And so to religion natural philosophy is rightly given as her most faithful servant, the former manifesting God's Will, the latter His power. (NO, OFB XI, 145).

Spinoza, of course, would not hesitate to critique or reformulate Bacon's argument in light of his own metaphysical views. Bacon's distinction between the will of God and God's power, he tells us, is fundamentally flawed.<sup>82</sup> What matters here is that Spinoza's discussion of miracles in

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<sup>82</sup> See TTP 6.23; GIII 85-6: "we have a far better right to call those works we clearly and distinctly understand works of God, and to refer them to God's will, than we do those we are completely ignorant of, though the latter occupy our imagination powerfully and carry men away with wonder. For only the works of nature which we understand clearly and distinctly make our knowledge of God more elevated and indicate God's will and decrees as clearly as possible. So those who have recourse to the will of God

chapter 6 is framed within a clear Baconian framework. Spinoza first reformulates a Baconian, or at least Baconian-inspired, philosophical argument in favor of his own views on miracles. He then goes on to show that the very same conclusion can also be obtained through historical reasoning alone, viz. through the construction of a 'Baconian' history of miracles that fully takes into account the process of transmission and editing of the text, as well as the intentions and biases of the authors involved.

In this chapter, we discussed two important consequences of Spinoza's application of Baconian methodology to Scripture. The integration of Scripture within the canon of civil history results in a methodology that places primary emphasis on the search for the mind and intentions of its various authors. For Spinoza, this necessarily entails an increased awareness of the biases involved in the process of transmission. The purpose and outcome of this procedure is straightforward, but suggestive nonetheless: our understanding of supernatural inspiration and miracles as related in and through Scripture is tendentious as a result of historical forces at work in the act of reading and transmitting the text.

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when they have no knowledge of a thing are just trifling. It's a ridiculous way of confessing their ignorance."

### CHAPTER 3: ANOTHER DIALOGUE IN THE TTP: SPINOZA ON CHRIST'S DISCIPLES AND THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS)

Spinoza is often portrayed as the secular saint of the radical enlightenment who draws on the new sciences (e.g. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750*). While this image is not wholly false, it has led to a neglect of the religious sources of his thought. In this chapter, I show that key elements of Spinoza's philosophy draw on ideas found in the religious ferment that accompanied the confrontation between Collegiant and Quaker thought in seventeenth century Holland.

Spinoza's involvement with the Collegiants, an eclectic company of Dutch Protestants who placed themselves outside the Calvinist Reformed Church to read Scripture and freely debate religious matters, has received considerable scholarly attention (E.g. Van Slee, *De Rijnsburger Collegianten*; Fix, *Prophecy and Reason, The Dutch Collegiants in the Early Enlightenment*; Klever, *Mannen rond Spinoza, 1650-1700: presentatie van een emanciperende generatie*; Frampton, "Benedictus de Spinoza among Heterodox Christians"; Van Bunge, "Spinoza and the Collegiants"). By contrast, Spinoza's relations with the early Quakers remains a relatively unexplored topic. In fact, much of the existing research can be attributed to one man, Richard Popkin, whose contributions remain the subject of controversy. Popkin ascribes a brief Quaker period to Spinoza's life, following his excommunication in 1656, and identifies Spinoza's first publication as the Hebrew translation of two Quaker conversionist pamphlets circulating at that time in Amsterdam.<sup>83</sup> Lack of conclusive historical evidence has left other commentators wondering. The implication that Spinoza once actively supported a religious sect in its endeavor to convert and attract Jews to a new purified form of Christianity is received with disbelief and

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<sup>83</sup> See his introduction to Richard H. Popkin and Michael A. Singer, *Spinoza's earliest publication? The Hebrew Translation of Margaret Fell's "A loving salutation to the Seed of Abraham among the Jews, wherever they are scattered up and down the Face of the Earth"*, 1-15 and his papers "Spinoza's Relations with the Quakers in Amsterdam", 'Spinoza and Samuel Fisher', 'Spinoza, the Quakers and the Millenarians,' *Manuscripta* 6 (1982), 113-33.



even ridicule.<sup>84</sup> Leaving aside the question of ‘Spinoza’s first publication,’ Popkin’s research generates fruitful lines of inquiry. Regardless of whether Spinoza ever officially joined their ranks, and I doubt he ever did, his contact with the Quaker movement exposed him to some of the most ground-breaking religious ideas of that moment. The Quaker denial that Scripture is the Word of God, the emphasis on the individual’s independence in interpreting Scripture, on the use of the inner light and conviction with no mention of creeds – to name but a few – all permeate Spinoza’s own work.

Spinoza’s critique of revelation is often presented as the hallmark of his notorious rebellion against revealed religion. For Spinoza, God acts simply out of the necessity of his nature. His rejection of a personal God who by act of will could intervene in the order of the natural world excludes the possibility of any special or miraculous intervention, aid, or insight. Spinoza’s God does not act for the sake of man (e.g. EI, appendix). The Quaker reliance upon direct inspiration and the spontaneous authority of Christ’s inward light may at first seem to represent much that is antithetical to Spinozism. As we shall see, however, this is only partly true. Spinoza’s metaphysical critique of anthropomorphism, divine providence, and teleological thinking expressed most forcefully in the *Ethics* has little bearing on Spinoza’s assessment of religious prophecy as presented in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. That is, Spinoza maintains a clear distinction between *philosophical* and *theological* assessments of divine revelation. In the context of biblical religion, Spinoza argues, individuals are not punishable for the alleged irrationality of their convictions; the mark of faith lies entirely in one’s dedication to a life of justice and charity. Insofar as individuals are guided in conduct to others by loving-kindness and justice, faithful obedience to God is posited. Put differently, from a theological-political perspective, metaphysical or epistemological concerns simply are irrelevant, or secondary as best. Whatever enthusiastic appeals are made, individuals should only be restrained insofar as their religious opinions give rise to practices that endanger or undermine socio-political stability. Whereas

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<sup>84</sup> For an extremely critical assessment, see Niewöhner, ‘review of Popkin/Signer: Spinoza’s earliest publication’. For a more balanced account, see Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 158-163.

Spinoza's enlightened stance towards the religious phenomenon often is characterized in terms of a confrontation between reason and revelation,<sup>85</sup> this study contends that this is a highly misleading view. Spinoza's reflections on religion above all indicate an awareness of the inevitability of human appeals to prophetic inspiration, and the responsibility of the state alone in steering prophetically inspired actions in the right direction. An examination of Spinoza's concept of piety and religious prophecy in light of the early Quaker phenomenon is particularly useful in bringing this feature of Spinozism to attention.

### 3.1 Quakers and Collegiants on the Principle of Light

In 1656, the English preacher and writer William Ames arrived in Amsterdam to spread the Quaker message more widely.<sup>86</sup> Like many of the early Friends, his story is one of a profound spiritual awakening following many years of wandering and religious questioning. Ames writes that during his time as a Baptist preacher he knew "that sin was alive in [him], and that [he] was under the power of Darkness." He explains that he "had only the forms of holiness," yet lacked the power "by which Sin might be overcome" (quoted from Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb's War*, 53). A spiritual transformation occurred when it was shown to him that the Word of God was already present within; that all men by turning to the inward light of Christ might know their salvation. Early Friends maintained that only through recognition of Christ's light within could humankind once again cultivate good desires towards God and commence the work of sanctification.

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<sup>85</sup> E.g. Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 35: "The context to which it [viz. Spinoza's work] belongs is the critique of Revelation as attempted by the radical Enlightenment."

<sup>86</sup> William Ames (d. 1662), an English Baptist minister who converted to Quakerism, became a prominent figure in the Holland Quaker movement. He wrote a substantial number of Dutch Quaker tracts. His *Mysteries of the Kingdom of God* (original title: *De Verborgentheden van het Rijke Godts, ende de werkinge leydinge en bestieringe van Godts Geest verklaert in tegenstelling van de letterlijke oefeningen voorgesteld als de ware Godtsdienst door Galenus Abrahamsz ende door zijn aenhangers ende toestemmers geloof*) has recently been translated into English. See Jo Van Cauter and Laura Rediehs, "Spiritualism and Rationalism in Dutch Collegiant Thought: New Evidence from William Ames's *Mysteries of the Kingdom of God* (1661), with a Translation," *Lias* 40/2 (2013), 105-175. All subsequent references to Ames' *Mysteries* will be to this edition.

In order to fully appreciate the depth and radicalism of the Quaker experience of the “divine indwelling” it is useful to immediately direct attention to the Quaker idea of the second coming. The Quakers, like other Millenarians of the period, were convinced that this moment in Christian eschatology would soon take place (Popkin, ‘Spinoza's Relations with the Quakers’, 17). Scholarship, however, emphasizes that although the early Quakers initially had diverging views concerning what they called the endtimes, most Friends believed that a second coming could already be experienced inwardly (e.g. Moore, *The Light in Their Consciences*, 68; Dandelion, *An introduction to Quakerism*, 31. For the early Quakers, Christ no longer was known “at a distance.” (Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb's War*, 35). God had sent His Son – Christ, “God’s Word, Life and Light that enlightens every man that comes into the world” (Ames, *Mysteries*, 127) – so that people could believe and be guided directly through Christ’s eternal spirit.

By emphasizing an immediate, inward knowledge of Christ, Quakers claimed to experience the Word of God as they believed the primitive Christians had (Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb's War*, 4). They advocated a first-hand experience of divine reality, grounded not in any external liturgical form, but in the covenant of life with God itself, similar to Christ’s early followers who lived in a time when the New Testament had not yet been written. For the early Quakers, as William Braithwaite puts it, God dwells “not in temples made with hands but in men’s heart – His people were His temple and He dwelt in them” (*The Beginnings of Quakerism*, 33). Quakers felt that by rejecting ecclesiastical authority and basing their faith directly on the guidance of the light within they were reclaiming primitive Christianity, and thereby able to avoid corruptions that plagued other Churches (e.g. Van Cauter and Rediehs, ‘Spiritualism and Rationalism’, 111). ‘The age of the Spirit was now - ‘Christ is come and coming’ - and it was left to people like George Fox, Margareth Fell, William Ames and many others to “declare this *Primitive Message* ... That God is Light” (Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb's War*, 11).

Ames, who soon emerged as the central figure of the Quaker community in Holland, played a pivotal role in what came to be known as the ‘war of pamphlets’ between Quakers and Collegiants. Given the shared features of their faith and practice both groups were quickly drawn to each other. Collegiants, like the Quakers, met without preachers to read the Bible and freely discussed religious matters, also emphasizing a belief in the light within (e.g. Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 139). However, despite many points of resemblance, important Collegiant figures soon became critical of the Quaker message.

One crucial point of contention concerned the exact nature of the inward light. According to Andrew Fix, a “final break” between the Collegiants and Quakers arose in 1660 when Collegiants started to abandon a spiritualistic interpretation of the light in favour of rationalism” (Fix, *Prophecy and Reason*, 196). The doctrine of the inner light gradually “transformed from a belief in direct divine inspiration of the individual soul to an embryonic idea of the natural light of reason” (Ibid., 192). Fix places special emphasis on Pieter Balling’s *A Light Upon the Candlestick*, a Collegiant manuscript written by one of Spinoza’s intimate friends.<sup>87</sup> Fix argues that while Balling’s work was still “solidly anchored” in the spiritualist tradition, it now “identified the light of truth with that fundamental and indubitable rational knowledge upon which Descartes built his new philosophy.” The controversy with the Quakers is seen as “an event of great importance” for this development. Fix, for instance, writes that:

Collegiants reacted to Quaker spiritualistic zeal by modifying traditional Collegiant spiritualism in a rationalistic direction. By developing a secular interpretation of the inner light these Rijnsburgers perhaps hoped to undercut the legitimacy of Quaker claims based on the inworking of the Holy Spirit. (Fix, *Prophecy and Reason*, 199)

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<sup>87</sup> Pieter Balling (d. 1669) was a mercantile agent, Mennonite, and member of the Collegiant movement. He is most famous for his *Het Licht op de Kandelaar* discussed in this section. Two versions of this work in English are available: as a pamphlet published by Quaker Universalist Fellowship, 1992 (2005 electronic version: <http://universalistfriends.org/pdf/candle.pdf>), and the version available as an Appendix to Sewel, *The History of the Rise, Increase, and Progress of the Christian People called Quakers*. Balling’s text has been republished in Dutch in W.N.A. Klever, ‘De Spinozistische prediking van Pieter Balling. Uitgave van ‘Het licht op den kandelaar’ met biografische inleiding en commentaar’.

In sum, due to the Quaker controversy, Collegiants like Balling moved towards a naturalistic conception of the light, influenced by the new philosophy of Descartes and Spinoza. We find a similar assessment in Jonathan Israel and Wim Klever. Although Balling's concept of the "true light" presented in *Candlestick* is "well clothed in spiritual terms," for Israel it ultimately refers to the clear and distinct knowledge of the Cartesians. *Candlestick*, at any rate, should not be "mistaken for a Quaker tract" (*Radical Enlightenment*, 344 & 170, n. 60). Klever points out that the text contains several "evangelical" words or concepts, yet maintains that for Balling himself these always retain "a purely naturalistic or secular meaning." For Klever, *Candlestick* is nothing but a "Spinozistic tract" (*Mannen rond Spinoza*, 15-29). These commentators thus agree that *Candlestick* represents (first) a clear example of the evolution of Collegiant thought from spiritualism to naturalism due to Cartesian and Spinozistic influences, as well as (second) a decisive, or at least important, departure from Quaker views.

The fact that Balling was close friends with Spinoza gives considerable credibility to the first hypothesis. Spinoza's *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* was written in 1662 and published in 1663, and it was translated into Dutch in 1664 by Balling himself. Given that Spinoza developed this work at the same time as Balling wrote *The Light upon the Candlestick* it is likely that they discussed Cartesian philosophy together. Cartesianism and Spinozism clearly influenced Balling in his work (e.g. Fix, *Prophecy and Reason*, 193, 200).

The second assertion, that *Candlestick* represents a departure from Quaker views, poses more problems. Fix remarks that *Candlestick* "has attracted more scholarly attention than any other Collegiant work" (*Ibid.*, 204). Indeed, besides the mentioned ambiguity concerning the interpretation of the inner light, additional confusion resulted from the anonymous title page, which references the separate work *Mysteries of the Kingdom of God* as authored by Ames. We now know that Balling wrote the anonymously published *Candlestick* (e.g., Klever, *Mannen rond Spinoza*, 14). Furthermore, while the title page might suggest an attempt to refute Ames, a comparative assessment of the two works shows that *Candlestick* actually affirms Quaker thought. Put

differently, “it was not that someone decided to put Ames’ name to Balling’s work, but that the title page was describing (and acknowledging) the influence of William Ames’ work on *The Light upon the Candlestick*.” (Van Cauter and Rediehs, ‘Spiritualism and Rationalism’,” 110).

Ames’ *Mysteries of the Kingdom of God* itself was a reaction to the work of another important Collegiant, Abraham Galenus. The main points of discussion between Galenus and Ames discussed in *Mysteries* concern the precise nature of the inward light and the relative priority of the Bible versus the inward light.<sup>88</sup> Two central premises ground Ames’ argumentation in *Mysteries*:

First, the light is “the first principle of religion.” That is, only the Light of Christ can reveal our sinful nature to ourselves, and show us how to walk again in the goodness and power of God. He formulates this as follows: “it is the light ... - that enlightens every man that comes into the world - that cultivates in men good desires towards God, the fountain of eternal life; ... the light reveals in the conscience of man, the impurity of his ways” (Ames, *Mysteries*, 147).

Second, the Bible can only be properly understood when read with the illumination of the light within. *Mysteries* exposes the deficiencies of a literal reading of Scripture; only by first embracing inner Christ, the light to which Scripture testifies, can the biblical writings fulfil their function as a source of spiritual truth. Ames writes that men like Galenus teach people “a form of Godgloriness (which consists of external labours) to be followed to the letter ... and thus they lead them away from the path in which God gives his Spirit, to search for the Spirit in a path where they are unable to ever obtain it.” (Ibid., 151).

Balling’s *Candlestick* defends these same two principles. Balling confirms that the light is the first principle of religion: “For seeing there can be no true Religion without the knowledge of God, and no knowledge of God without this *Light*, Religion must necessarily have this *Light* for its first Principle.”<sup>89</sup> Similarly he claims:

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 113. For an in-depth treatment of these matters see also Rediehs, ‘Candlestick Mysteries’, 151-169.

<sup>89</sup> All references to Balling’s *Candlestick* are from the online edition published by the Quaker Universalist Fellowship, <http://universalistfriends.org/candle.html#3>. Accessed January, 2016.

direct thee then to within thyself, that is, that thou oughtest to turn into, to mind and have regard unto that which is within thee, to wit, *The Light of Truth, the true Light which enlighten every man that cometh into the world.* ... Here thou shalt find a Principle certain and infallible, and whereby increasing and going on therein, thou mayest at length arrive unto a happy condition ... hereby he may happily attain unto his chiefest salvation, which consisteth only in *Union with God.* (Ibid.)

Balling also agrees with Ames that the Bible can only be properly understood when read with the illumination of the light within:

Is not this [the *Light*] that by which we must see and know God, and so consequently that by which we must judge all things Divine? Certainly 'tis: then it follows also, That we can judge of no Doctrine, no Book that is Divine, but by this *Light* and judging it thereby to be Divine ... *The letters, the words are not the Scriptures,* but the mind alone is the Scripture, and this meaning can never be truly and justly hit, but by those alone that stand in the same *Light*, out of which the Scriptures proceed. (Ibid.)

In sum, Balling's *Candlestick* defends the very same principles that Quaker Ames earlier had defended against Galenus.

Readers familiar with *Candlestick* will object that Balling's use of the light clearly has a more naturalistic undertone than the one we find in Ames. After all, Balling defines the Light as "a clear and distinct knowledge of truth in the understanding of every man, by which he is so convinced of the Being and Quality of things, that he cannot possibly doubt thereof." This definition has clear Cartesian undertones. However, immediately preceding this definition, Balling also stresses that it ultimately does not matter what one calls this light principle: "it's all one to us whether ye call it, *Christ, the Spirit, the Word,* &c. seeing these all denote but one and the same thing." For Balling, light stands for both "Christ, the Spirit, the Word" and "a clear and distinct knowledge of truth" (Ibid.). What matters most, as Sadler points out, is that in *Candlestick* "neither the rational nor the spiritual sense of the 'light' triumphs over the other" ("The Collegiants: A Small Presence in the Dutch Republic, a Large Metaphor for the Book, 66).

Balling's discussion of the light is couched in such ambiguous terms that it does not allow for any specific, straightforward interpretation (e.g. Van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza*, 107; Vermij, "The light of nature and the allegorisation of science", 228). At any rate, while Balling's use of Light in *Candlestick* leaves open the way for naturalist readings of this concept, it still is not a refutation of Quaker thought. On the contrary, on both principal issues Balling unambiguously sides with Ames.

It is safe to assume that naturalistic interpretations of *Candlestick* may influence our understanding of Spinoza's own relation with the Quakers. On this reading, the gradual yet undeniable naturalization of the Collegiants' concept of the inner light at least was partly due to disagreement with the Quakers; and since it was Spinoza himself who advocated Cartesian principles among Collegiants we are led to assume that Spinoza too probably had little patience with Quaker views. A comparison of Balling's *Candlestick*, Ames' *Mysteries*, and Spinoza's *Short Treatise* however shows that Spinoza's views at that time harmonized quite well with Quaker doctrine.

Spinoza, in all likelihood, met Ames in 1657 (Popkin, 'Spinoza's Relations with the Quakers', 26).

In a letter to Quaker Margareth Fell, Ames describes this event as following:

There is a Jew at amsterdam that by the Jews is Cast out (as he himself and others sayeth) because he owneth no other teacher but the light and he sent for me and I spoke toe him and he was pretty tender and doth owne all that is spoken; and he sayde to read of moyses and the prophets without was nothing toe him except he came toe know it within: and soe the name of Christ it is like he doth owne.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Quoted from Popkin, "Spinoza's Relations with the Quakers," 15. There remains some discussion as to whether Spinoza actually was the 'Jew at Amsterdam' described by Ames. Niewöhner points out that Ames' letter does not specify the exact year of excommunication. Spinoza was not the only Jew who was expelled at that time. The letter, Niewöhner argues, therefore does not provide complete proof for Popkin's assertion. See his 'review of Popkin/Signer: Spinoza's earliest publication', 399. While Niewöhner's caution should be taken into account, others have argued that Spinoza at least is the most plausible candidate. See, for instance, Katz, *Sabbath and Sectarianism in Seventeenth-Century England*, 160; Kasher and Biderman, 'Why was Baruch de Spinoza excommunicated?', 135.



Ames' meeting with Spinoza appeared to be a fruitful one. According to Ames, Spinoza agreed that there is no other teacher but the light and that the Old Testament law could only be read meaningfully when known *within*. To know Scripture "within" for the early Quakers implied the necessity of cultivating an understanding of Scripture that transcends a mere diligence to the letter. William Penn explains that there must be "a more Inward Spiritual and deep grounded Faith of those things recorded in Scripture ... then the meer Letter is able to give. And therefore that Light and Spirit which gives that discerning ... must needs be as well the Rule as Author of it" (quoted from Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb's War*, 115). Similarly, Ames writes that we need to open our "internal spiritual ear without which man is unable to hear God's word" (Ames, *Mysteries*, 153). According to Ames, Spinoza thus supported the very same principles defended in *Candlestick* and *Mysteries*. Some caution is in order here. Ames, after all, is not an impartial observer. We should be watchful about using his letter as evidence for Spinoza's views. However, Spinoza's *Short Treatise*, an early work written and circulating around the same period, provides considerable support for Ames' assertion.

First, Spinoza affirms that there is no other teacher but the light. In Chapter XIX, Spinoza writes that the light teaches us that we that we exist as a "part of the whole" – i.e. that we are totally "dependent on God" – and hence that we can "accomplish very little, or nothing" without God (ST 2.18, 85). Spinoza identifies this knowledge – i.e. the knowledge of our union with God we gain through the use of the light – as constituting the essence of religion.<sup>91</sup> He writes that this knowledge "brings us so far that we attribute all to God, love him alone because he is the most glorious and the most perfect, and thus offer ourselves up entirely to him; for these really constitute both the true religion and our own eternal happiness and bliss." Furthermore, "this knowledge frees us from Sorrow, from Despair, from Envy, from Terror, and other evil passions" (ST 2.18, 85). Spinoza thus posits the light as man's guiding principle, as that

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<sup>91</sup> It is interesting to see how contemporaries of Spinoza associated this idea of an intimate union with God of all things with both Spinozism and Quakerism. Robert Hook, referring to on-going discussions on pantheistic metaphysics in his diary dated July 24, 1678, writes that he was occupied with "much discussion about Spinoza Quakers" (quoted from Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, 55).

through which we experience union with God and are capable of leading worthy lives.

Second, the Quaker claim that Scripture can only be read meaningfully with the light also emerges in the *Short Treatise*, albeit somewhat veiled. In chapter XXIV, Spinoza asks “how God can make himself known to men,” and whether this “could have happened, by means of spoken words.” Spinoza’s answer is no:

for in that case man must have known the signification of the words before they were spoken to him. For example, if God had said to the Israelites, *I am Jehovah your God*, then they would have had to know first, apart from these words, that God existed, before they could be assured thereby that it was he [who was speaking to them]. (ST 2.24, 97)

Spinoza explains that only by means of the natural light are we capable of recognizing something as divine. That is, in absence of an idea of God, revelation simply would be meaningless and impossible (Klever, ‘De Spinozistische prediking van Pieter Balling’, 80). To fully understand Spinoza’s meaning here, consider his claim (mentioned above) that all men are necessarily dependent on God. The *Short Treatise* explains that this idea of union with God necessarily follows from our existence as finite bodies. Being aware of our own body, the human mind automatically is drawn to that “without which the body and Idea [i.e. the mind] could neither be, nor be understood,” i.e. God or infinite substance (ST 2.22, 94). In other words, as finite beings that exist *in* God we necessarily have an idea of God.<sup>92</sup> This idea, of course, in many cases will not be perfect. Spinoza remarks that we must not “know him just as he is, or adequately, for it is sufficient for us to know him to some extent, in order to be united with him” (ST 2.23, 94). In sum, all men have a certain idea of God due to their existence as finite beings; hence it follows that it is through the light alone – and not through external signs – that God makes himself known to men. From this we can infer that Scripture too can only have meaning to those who already have a certain conception of God. Or to put this differently: the letter by itself is dead, we need – using Quaker terminology – “an inner ear” to penetrate its message. Indeed, as Spinoza

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<sup>92</sup> For an excellent discussion of the so-called ‘in-relation’ in Spinoza’s metaphysics, see Laerke, ‘Spinoza’s Cosmological Argument in the *Ethics*’, 439-462.

later explains in the *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), in order to appreciate the teachings of the prophets, the reader of Scripture himself must have “a heart inclined to the right and the good” (TTP 7.11; GIII 99).

Some might object to the spiritualistic, perhaps mystical, reading suggested here. After all, for Spinoza the knowledge of God we gain through the light – as Nadler emphasizes – “is the knowledge of Nature in its broadest Dimension” (*Spinoza: A Life*, 189). However, it is significant that despite Spinoza’s commitment to a rationalistic conception of the Light, he still could fall back on spiritualistic terms to refer to it. Indeed, Spinoza in the *Short Treatise* uses the terminology of the “Son of God” to refer to the corpus of adequate knowledge of nature we gain through the use of reason (ST 1.9, 59 & ST 2.22, 94; for further discussion see section 3.3). Similarly, many early Friends, who likewise distinguished between the light within and the rational faculty (e.g. Dudiak and Rediehs, ‘Quakers, Philosophy, and Truth’, 513), also saw it fit to use the term “reason” to refer to the inward Light. Quaker Samuel Fisher, another contact of Spinoza, wrote that the light “is not against, but according to right reason; for they are synonymous” (quoted Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*, 61, n. 92). Arguably, Collegiants like Balling, Spinoza, and Quakers like Fisher regarded the efficacy of the principle of light in teaching ethics and love of God to be more important than the debated nature of the light itself. What matters is moral improvement, whether one is moved by the Spirit or by reason.

Some questions remain. One may wonder why Spinoza – for whom the inward light is nothing but the natural light – does not straightforwardly condemn spiritualist notions such as the Quaker idea of the divine indwelling. The following section answers this question by directing attention to Spinoza’s more mature thought as expressed in the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

### 3.2 QUAKER PIETY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE TTP

In the TTP, Spinoza argues that the central teaching of the Bible is easily discernible: “From Scripture itself we have perceived its most important themes without any difficulty or ambiguity: to love God above all else, and to love your neighbor as yourself” (TTP 12.34; GIII 165). Put differently, Scripture’s purpose is to teach “that God is supremely just and supremely merciful, *or*, that he is the unique model of the true life” (TTP 13.23; GIII 171). Spinoza remarks that, as far as faith is concerned, it is irrelevant whether one considers “God (*or* that model of true life) as “fire, spirit, light, [or] thought” (TTP 14.30; GIII 178).

Since, according to Spinoza, Scripture’s teaching boils down to the *command* to love one’s neighbor, it follows for him that its narratives are means only to obedience, not knowledge per se. Spinoza emphasizes “that faith is not saving by itself, but only in relation to obedience, or as James says (James 2:17), faith by itself, without works, is dead” (TTP 14.14; GIII 175). Quakers likewise placed primary emphasis on the necessity of works. Also relying heavily on the Epistle of James, Friends argued that men “could not expect to be justified by faith when their lives brought forth only the fruits of unbelief” (Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb’s War*, 58). William Penn, for instance, writes that “no man hath Faith without Sanctification and Work; therefore the Works of Righteousness, by the Spirit, are necessary to complete Justification” (quoted from Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb’s War*, 57-8). For both Spinoza and the early Quakers, people are acquitted by obedience only when the righteousness of the law is fulfilled in them. When Quakers argued that Scripture’s only purpose is to direct people to the light – a light that empowers and commands men to do good works and “walk in obedience to that which is pure” (Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, 141) – they advocated a form a religious piety perfectly in line with Spinoza’s own interpretation of Scripture.

### 3.3 SPINOZA ON 'CHRIST ACCORDING TO THE SPIRIT'

Spinoza's claim that charitable behavior alone is the true sign of Biblical faith – a claim shared by many early Friends – is captured adequately in a letter to Catholic Albert Burgh. Spinoza writes:

Since we know (to quote from the Apostle John, First Epistle, Chapter 4 verse 13) that we dwell in God and God dwells in us, it follows that whatever distinguishes the Roman Church from others is of no real significance, and consequently is constructed merely from superstition. For, as I have said with John, justice and charity are the one sure sign of the true catholic faith, the true fruits of the Holy Spirit, and wherever these are found, there Christ really is, and where they are not Christ is not. For only by the Spirit of Christ can we be led to the love of justice and charity. (Ep. 76, 948)

Spinoza affirms that men can achieve salvation through works of justice and loving-kindness alone. For Spinoza and Quakers alike, ceremonies, sacraments, and other outward practices no longer are seen as essential. Spinoza, moreover, identifies the idea that charitable behavior alone is the true sign of Biblical faith with the concept of the 'spirit of Christ'. Now, "to know Christ according to the Spirit, and to have Christ within oneself," is a well-known Quaker expression (see e.g. Popkin, 'Spinoza and Bible scholarship', 402). Spinoza, as the quote makes clear, identifies this concept with the love of just and charitable behavior. To conduct acts of justice and loving-kindness is to be guided by 'the spirit of Christ'. In the TTP, Spinoza outlines two distinct bodies of knowledge capable of providing the motivational basis for acting accordingly.

First, as his reply to Burgh already suggests, Spinoza associates 'the spirit of Christ' with exemplary moral behavior; the concept seems to relate primarily to knowledge that incites people to act justly (TTP 5.46; GIII 79). Other passages from the TTP indicate that the aim of this knowledge is not so narrow as it seems. In chapter 4, Spinoza discusses Romans 8:9 in which Paul taught his disciples that "no one becomes blessed unless he has in himself the mind of Christ;" to which Spinoza adds "by which he perceives God's laws as eternal truths" (TTP 4.36; GIII 65). According to Spinoza, eternal truths about substance are truths that follow necessarily

from the very nature or definition of substance (see e.g. TTP 4.1; GIII 57). That is, they are logically necessary truths that are timelessly true. The Spirit of Christ thus relates to the corpus of adequate knowledge of nature. He who has the ‘spirit of Christ’ within him participates in divine understanding and has at his disposal a number of unshakeable truths about substance.

Furthermore, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza equates the “idea of God” (*idea Dei*) with God’s infinite intellect (EIIp4dem). According to Spinoza, the infinite intellect is the immediate infinite mode of thought. Spinoza’s account of infinite modes is one of the most ambiguous issues in his metaphysics; there is yet no consensus on how to interpret them.<sup>93</sup> What matters for our present concern (and this is uncontroversial) is that God’s infinite intellect contains adequate ideas of everything.<sup>94</sup> Further suggestive evidence is found in the *Short Treatise*: Spinoza calls the infinite intellect, i.e. the mode of understanding immediately dependent on God, the “Son of God” (ST, 59, 94). When in a letter to Henry Oldenburg Spinoza identifies the Spirit of Christ with “the eternal son of God” or “God’s eternal wisdom” (Ep. 73, 943), he thus equates it with nothing else than God’s infinite intellect. Indeed, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza too explicitly equates the “Spirit of Christ” with the idea of God. He writes that a person who is “guided by the Spirit of Christ” is guided by nothing else than “the idea of God, on which alone it depends that man should be free, and desire for other men the good he desires for himself” (EIVp68s). The ethical dimensions of the spirit of Christ are those just acts that follow from this knowledge (see TTP 4.46; GIII 68). The spirit of Christ thus signifies the aggregate of adequate knowledge of nature, i.e. the idea of God; such knowledge inspires in the man of reason a love of justice and loving-

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<sup>93</sup> A number of scholars identify infinite modes with the most general laws of nature according to which all singular things are governed. See Curley (*Spinoza’s Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation and Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza’s Ethics*), Yovel (“The Infinite Mode and Natural Laws in Spinoza”), and Don Garrett (“Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind That is Eternal”). An opposing view can be found in Schmaltz (“Spinoza on Eternity and Duration: The 1663 Connection”) He argues that Spinoza’s infinite modes of extension should be seen as permanent features of the material world rather than eternal laws.

<sup>94</sup> Garber explains this as following: “Basic to Spinoza’s philosophy is the idea that “the knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of its cause” (EIa4). God, of course, has ideas of everything in God’s infinite intellect, both ideas of effects and ideas of all their causes. Because of this, all of God’s ideas are adequate” (“A Free Man Thinks of Nothing Less Than of Death’: Spinoza on the Eternity of the Mind’, 107).

kindness. He who has the spirit of Christ within him possesses a clear and distinct conception of God and uses that knowledge for the benefit of mankind. The spirit of Christ is present in those who spontaneously devote themselves to justice and charity because they understand that this is what reason demands.<sup>95</sup>

The letter to Burgh further suggests, intriguingly, that Christ according to the spirit is found not only in the intellectual elite, but also in men who act justly without a robust collection of adequate knowledge. Christians who devote themselves to justice and charity – and hereby, according to Spinoza, exhibit “the one sure sign of the true catholic faith” – also have the spirit of Christ within them (Ep. 76, 948). Evidence that the spirit of Christ is equally manifested in those who act justly through earnest, Christian obedience, is found also in the TTP. While discussing the seventh dogma of faith (viz. that God pardons the sins of those who repent) Spinoza writes that: “whoever firmly believes that God, out of mercy and the grace by which he directs everything, pardons men's sins, and who for this reason is more inspired by the love of God, that person really knows Christ according to the Spirit, and Christ is in him” (TTP 14.28; GIII 178). The spirit of Christ thus manifests itself in at least two distinct groups of people: in those who act justly out of intellectual enlightenment and in those who through pious faith are inspired towards justice and charity.

Earlier, in Section 3.1, I argued that Balling and Spinoza due to their confrontation with the Quakers – at least in the early 1660s – developed and accepted an account of the light as an inward source of religious truth, regardless of its specific connotation. On this account, the (spiritual) “light within” and (natural) “light of reason” both are presented as gateways to moral improvement and divine union. Here I want to suggest that Spinoza’s reading of Scripture presented in the TTP reflects this spirit of reconciliation and tolerance. That is, Spinoza in the TTP presents piety in such a way as to confirm the equivalence of the prophetic and natural light

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<sup>95</sup> Consequently, these persons need no instruction by the Bible: “someone who is completely unfamiliar with these narratives, and nevertheless has salutary opinions and a true manner of living, is completely blessed and really has the Spirit of Christ in him” (TTP 5.46; GIII 79).

as effective means to the pursuit of justice and loving-kindness and hence salvation.<sup>96</sup> Spinoza writes that “[he] acknowledge[s] no difference ... whether it is by the natural light or by revelation that God teaches and commands the true pursuit of justice and loving-kindness. For it does not matter how that pursuit is revealed” (TTP 19.5; GIII 229). Despite Spinoza’s harsh philosophical critique of the idea of a supernatural light (e.g. TTP 7.71; GIII 112; TTP 7.74; GIII 113 and TTP 13.5; GIII 167), the realm of theology demands a more tolerant approach to spirituality.<sup>97</sup> Provided that the prophetic light succeeds in stimulating in believers a love of justice, it ultimately does not matter how they perceive that light. Indeed, “in every Church there are very many honourable men who worship God with justice and charity. For we have known many such among the Lutherans, the Reformed Church, the Mennonites and the Enthusiasts, and, to say nothing of others” (Ep. 76, 948).

Moreover, Spinoza – both in the TTP and the aforementioned letter to Burgh – invokes 1 John in support of his claim that charitable behavior alone is the true sign of Biblical faith. Spinoza’s use of 1 John is ingenious, to say the least. 1 John’s accusation not only is directed against those who neglect the importance of good conduct; the text identifies both ethical and Christological errors. John’s first letter centers around the idea that only through a confession of the incarnation, i.e. through a genuine conviction that Jesus is the Christ or that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh,” salvation can be obtained (see 1 John 2.18-27 and 4.1-3). It is exactly the belief in the identity of the man Jesus with the divine Son of God, and the redeeming value of his

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<sup>96</sup> There might also have been epistemological reasons for Spinoza’s ‘attraction’ to the Quaker notion of the divine indwelling. Remarkably, a number of Descartes’ contemporaries compared his epistemological approach – viz. the notion of divinely imprinted clear and distinct ideas that guarantee the truth of one’s judgment – with Quakerism. See Heyd, *Be Sober and Reasonable: the Critique of Enthusiasm in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries*, 109-43. It is not difficult to see why Spinoza, who equally maintains that someone who has a true idea cannot doubt its veracity, would find this connection worth exploring. Moreover, Descartes, in the Second Set of Replies to the *Meditations*, declares that both the natural light and the *lumen supernaturale* give rise to an irresistible assent of the intellect. John Cottingham, while elaborating on the question as to how this notion of a supernaturally induced subjective certainty fits within the overall Cartesian scheme, suggests that “the emphasis, at least in the case of revealed truths, would be on the utility of religious belief, rather than its rational demonstrability” (‘Descartes and the Voluntariness of Belief’, 230).

<sup>97</sup> For Spinoza, the emphasis is on motivational efficacy rather than veracity: “faith does not require tenets which are true as much as it does tenets which are pious, i.e., tenets which move the heart to obedience, even if there are many among them which have not even a shadow of the truth” (TTP 14.20; GIII 176).



sacrifice, that allows 1 John to assimilate possession of the Spirit with the love of one's neighbor.<sup>98</sup> 1 John's concern therefore is to warn against those who abnegate this truth, and hereby deceive themselves and others: "Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?" (1 John 2:22). Only through a recognition that Jesus is the incarnation of God's Word can the pathway to the Kingdom of God be opened. Or to put it differently: to know Christ according to the spirit is to regard Jesus as the risen, universal savior.

Spinoza's revision of the notion of the incarnation reminds us of the one performed by the early Quakers. As we have seen, Quakers advocated an inward, spiritual knowledge of Christ. The spirit of Christ no longer is known 'at a distance'. Christ is present immediately in those who through obedience to the light are empowered to do good works. For many contemporaries, the Quaker emphasis on the inwardness of Christ entailed a clear diminishing of the importance of the historical Christ. Baptists, for instance, realized that if the inner light is sufficient for salvation, Christ need not to have come into the world; his sacrifice simply would have been without purpose. In his valuable study of the Baptist-Quaker conflict in Seventeenth-Century England, T.L. Underwood describes the manifold difficulties Quakers had to counter this objection. What matters here is that the early Quakers stood their ground: "although they did not deny that the events of Christ's life had occurred outwardly," they generally maintained an understanding of the "resurrection as occurring within" (Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb's War*, 5) When Spinoza in his correspondence with Oldenburg is questioned for his claim that "for salvation it is not altogether necessary to know Christ according to the flesh" (Ep. 73, 943), a similar reply follows. Spinoza explains that he accepts the "passion, death and burial of Christ" literally (Ep. 78, 953), yet that "Christ's resurrection from the dead was in fact of a spiritual kind" (Ep. 75, 946). In sum, for both the Quakers and Spinoza alike, belief in the historical Christ no longer is seen as a necessary condition for salvation. Christ's incarnation is

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<sup>98</sup> Thompson stresses that "making manifest the unity of Jesus with God, [is] a constant if not central theme of John's Christology" ("The Gospel according to John," 188). See also the introduction to "The First Letter of John" in *The Harper Collins Study Bible, fully revised and updated*, 2072-3. All references to the Bible are in this edition.

interpreted spiritually, that is, the spirit of Christ manifests itself in those who devote themselves to justice and charity.

So far our inquiry into Spinoza's relations with the Quakers has generated remarkable conclusions. Spinoza, both in the *Short Treatise* and TTP, defends and expounds a number of quintessential Quaker claims. I conclude this study by referring to another passage in the TTP that will allow us to place Spinoza's assessment of Quakerism in a more nuanced light.

### 3.4. QUAKERISM AND TTP 19.31

Early Quakers initially faced relentless opposition from officials and churchmen. Because of their systematic attempts to disturb Reformed worship services, and their refusal to take off hats before magistrates or observe other social niceties, Quakers soon became known as disturbers of peace and social order (Moore, 'Seventeenth-century context and Quaker beginnings', 22). Although generally rather tolerant, many Dutch magistrates regarded Quakerism as a potential danger to the fragile yet stable order in church and society. Spinoza appeared to be fully aware of this. In chapter 19 where he discusses the necessity of accommodating the external practice of Religion to the peace of the state, he writes:

But if anyone should ask now "By what right could Christ's disciples, who were private men, preach religion?" I say that they did this by right of the control they had received from Christ over unclean Spirits ... [however] it is not permissible for anyone to take this as an example ... [for] if this had been said to everyone, the state would be established in vain, and that saying of Solomon - *my son, fear God and the king* (Proverbs 24:21) - would have been impious, which is far from being the case. And so it must be confessed that the authority Christ gave his disciples was given specially to them only, and that others cannot take them as an example. (TTP 19.31; GIII 234).

As mentioned before, early Quakers believed that they were reclaiming primitive Christianity. They considered themselves the apostles to their age, and hence saw themselves justified to

spread the message of light with all means available. Although Friends themselves advocated peaceful submission to state authority, it was exactly their fanaticism and spiritualistic excess in spreading the Word that labelled them a danger to state power. By emphasizing that Christ gave his original Apostles – and them only – the authority to spread the Christian message in places and states where it was not properly upheld, Spinoza can be read as warning Quakers against a too excessive religious zeal.

An important issue of contention among Collegiants and theologians in the 1660's and onwards concerned the continued accessibility to the form of divine inspiration commonly associated with Christ and his earliest disciples. According to both Jewish and Christian orthodoxy, the authors of Scripture were supernaturally guided by God to write the exact things He wanted expressed. An era of extraordinary divine inspiration created texts with a perfection that is unapproachable in other messages. However, on the standard account, writings from a later period than the Apostolic age are excluded from this special form of inspiration. That is, so-called public revelation was completed around the first centuries following Christ's death; religious texts from that moment onward could only have the value of private revelations (e.g. Lattier, 'The Orthodox Rejection of Doctrinal Development', 393).

Collegiant Abraham Galenus – Quaker William Ames' opponent in *Mysteries* – directly addresses this issue when he introduced the distinction between *beerlijkmaking*, i.e. extraordinary divine inspiration and *heiligmaking*, i.e. salvational divine inspiration. Whereas the first includes the power to convert others and purify the church, the second form of inspiration at best can effect one's own personal salvation. Whereas Galenus and many others limited the *beerlijkmaking* gift to the early days of Christianity, Quakers on the other hand believed that like the Apostles before them they too had the power to convert others (Fix, *Prophecy and Reason*, 192; Van Cauter and Rediehs, 'Spiritualism and Rationalism', 118). Spinoza's message in the passage above can be seen as directed against this Quaker attitude. To emphasize his point he remarks that although the original Apostles and "Prophets themselves were endowed with a divine virtue, still, because they

were private men, the freedom they displayed in warning, chiding and reproaching people aggravated them [the people] more than it corrected them” (TTP 19.45; GIII 236). The same warning against “public revelation” by private individuals is present in the *Political Treatise*. Spinoza writes:

I have no power, as Christ’s disciples once had, to cast out unclean spirits and to perform miracles. And this power is so necessary for the propagation of religion in places where it is proscribed that without it not only does one lose one's labour, as the saying goes, but in addition one stirs up a host of troubles. All ages have beheld the most grievous examples of this. Therefore everyone, wherever he may be, can worship God with true piety and mind his own affairs, as is the duty of a private individual. But the burden of propagating religion should be left to God or to the sovereign, on whom alone devolves the care of public affairs.(TP 3.10, 693)

Spinoza’s conclusion is straightforward: without the authority or permission of the state no one has the right to administer religious matters. Individuals who claim to possess the gift of extraordinary inspiration and performing miracles can try their luck. However, Spinoza suggests that those states that do take control over the practice of religion never will have anything to fear from prophets. Indeed, only in situations where the state fails to fulfil its regulatory function does the danger exist that opposing forms of authority emerge - i.e. that God (that is, Nature) steps in. The question as to whether this political critique of Quakerism for Spinoza ultimately entailed a complete condemnation of their religious doctrine remains a matter of debate.

## CHAPTER 4: SPINOZA ON 'CHRIST ACCORDING TO THE SPIRIT'

This chapter argues that Spinoza identifies the 'spirit of Christ' (*Christus secundum spiritum*) with, foremost, a desire for just and charitable behavior. It contends that Spinoza outlines various bodies of knowledge capable of providing the motivational basis for acting accordingly. First, Spinoza associates the 'spirit of Christ' with the idea of God (*idea Dei*), i.e. God's infinite intellect. The idea of God signifies the aggregate of adequate knowledge of nature; such knowledge inspires in the man of reason a desire for justice and loving-kindness. He, who embraces God's laws as eternal truths, and spontaneously devotes himself to justice and charity because he understands that this is what reason demands, has the 'spirit of Christ' within him.

Second, Spinoza associates the 'spirit of Christ' with an undefined number of bodies of inadequate knowledge (viz. knowledge of the first kind in the terminology of the *Ethics*) capable of leading men to justice and loving-kindness. In the TTP, Spinoza singles out the historical narratives of Scripture as providing the most dominant example of such a body of propositional knowledge. That is, Spinoza's redefined version of revealed religion, centred around a pious belief in seven tenets of faith, qualifies as a body of knowledge particularly effective in moving men's hearts towards brotherly love. The Bible presents people with the exemplar of God as king or lawgiver; an image grounded in inadequate knowledge yet unrivaled with regard to its motivational efficiency in bringing about a desire for justice and charity. Importantly, this motivational efficacy associated in the TTP primarily with the redefined version of revealed religion is not particular to both Testaments alone; other bodies of inadequate knowledge fulfill a similar function. For Spinoza, the manifestation of 'Christ within' is not strictly dependent on the societal presence of the Bible. Other narratives (whether sacred or secular), provided they successfully inspire in people a desire for justice and charity, also qualify as tools that lead people towards the 'spiritual Christ.'

Whereas more recent readings of 'Christ according the spirit' focus primarily on what I

call the intellectual aspect of this concept (the ‘spiritual Christ’ taken in the first sense, i.e. acting justly through intellectual enlightenment),<sup>99</sup> my reading reveals this approach to be highly misleading. I argue that what is crucial about Spinoza’s portrayal of ‘Christ according to the spirit’ is precisely its unifying dimension: philosophers as well as men of all religious and non-religious denominations attain it.

This chapter proceeds as follows. I begin in Section 4.1 with a discussion of Spinoza’s treatment of 1 John 4:13. I show that Spinoza uses 1 John 4:13 to put forward a radically revised – though in his opinion genuine – understanding of the incarnation: the ‘spirit of Christ’ manifests itself solely in those who conduct acts of justice and loving-kindness.

Section 4.2 and 4.3 provide a detailed analysis of Ep. 73 where our philosopher sets out the knowledge associated with this concept. In this letter, Spinoza writes that the spirit of Christ relates to knowledge that “teaches what is true and false, good and evil.” I argue that Spinoza’s distinction between (a) knowledge that teaches what is true and false and (b) knowledge that teaches what is good and evil corresponds to a distinction present in the *Ethics*, namely that between ‘true knowledge of good and evil’ and ‘knowledge of good and evil’ – without the ‘true’ – which I here call ‘purported knowledge of good and evil’. I show that Spinoza associates ‘true knowledge of good and evil’ with value judgments grounded primarily in reason, whereas ‘purported knowledge of good and evil’ is related to evaluative processes grounded mainly in the passions. The difference between both knowledges and the value judgments they give rise to is captured in the distinction between a lifestyle dominated by the striving towards the ideal of the Spinozistic ‘free man’ (an exemplar of human life modelled on an adequate conception of human nature) and lifestyles dominated by the striving towards more subjective, passion-based exemplars (exemplars of human life dominated by the pursuit of more transitory goods like e.g. honor, reward, sensual pleasure, and wealth).

Spinoza, both in the TTP and *Ethics*, leaves no doubt that there remains a vast and real

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<sup>99</sup> See especially Melamed, “Christus secundum spiritum’: Spinoza, Jesus and the infinite intellect’. See also Fraenkel, ‘Could Spinoza Have Presented the Ethics as the True content of the Bible?’, 4.

distinction between ‘*true* knowledge of good and evil’ which in an objective way is certain, and ‘*purported* knowledge of good and evil’ which relates primarily to a confused appropriation of human nature and the goods that contribute to its perfection. However, Spinoza simultaneously emphasizes the latter’s utility in bringing about favorable behavioral changes: evaluative judgments associated with *purported* ‘knowledge of good and evil’ often have the capacity to overrule other (more damaging) affects that are less motivationally effective. Passion-based exemplars, for this reason, still potentially contribute to an increasing wellbeing of oneself and others. I argue that Spinoza’s discussion of theological obedience in the TTP is meant to highlight this exact point: Scripture provides men with the image of God the lawgiver, a passion-based exemplar that relies instrumentally on the hopes and fears of the multitude in order to suppress other more destructive passions in favor of civility and brotherly love. The tenets of faith, in other words, qualify as a body of inadequate propositional knowledge that teaches religious adherents *purported* ‘knowledge of good and evil’; knowledge particularly effective in bringing about a desire for justice and loving-kindness. Importantly, Spinoza leaves open the possibility for other action-guiding exemplars to fulfill a similar function.

Section 4.4 examines Spinoza’s use of the notion ‘wisdom of doctrine.’ It argues that Spinoza invokes the term as a means to highlight the fine line between a constructive and destructive utility of passion-based exemplars and the *purported* knowledge of good and evil on which they are grounded. Contrary to models of human nature grounded in ‘certainly useful’ knowledge, passion-based exemplars often enhance rather than subdue irrational beliefs and superstitious behaviors. While passion-based exemplars often prove effective in leading people towards justice and charity – hence qualifying as pedagogical tools lead people towards the spiritual Christ – their successful proliferation ultimately is a matter of civil, sovereign authority.

The final section 4.5 argues that the ‘spirit of Christ’ is identified with a desire for just and charitable behavior manifested in so-called ‘present life,’ but does not by itself presuppose ‘eternity of mind.’ I show that the attainment of ‘intellectual love of God’, the realization of

*ultimate* Spinozistic freedom, is (1) characterized mainly as an intellectual, rather than socio-political activity directed towards the cultivation of *self-knowledge* and (2) entails a complete dismissal of evaluative language – viz. of notions of truth, falsity, good, evil and the various exemplars of human life that correspond to it. For Spinoza, the ‘spirit of Christ’ does not extend beyond the sphere of everyday socio-political life (beyond the so-called ‘common order of nature’); it relates directly to that stage of human life where evaluative language and action-guiding narratives still dominate course of action.

#### 4.1 SPINOZA ON 1 JOHN 4:13

##### 4.1.1: INTRODUCTION

Spinoza’s portrayal of Christ is not at all simple or straightforward. Indeed, during the final period of Spinoza’s life, he would be repeatedly interrogated regarding the obscurities inherent in his treatment of Jesus in the TTP. Henry Oldenburg, in his letter from 15 November 1675, voiced his concerns by remarking that “they say that you are concealing your opinion with regard to Jesus Christ, Redeemer of the World, sole Mediator for mankind, and of his Incarnation and Atonement, and they request you to disclose your attitude clearly” (Ep. 71, 940). Though Oldenburg remained true to his polite nature, many theologians reacted with more adamant aggression. Albert Burgh’s letter in particular captured the voracity of their sentiment: he wrote that Spinoza was “a sorry little creature, a vile little worm of the earth, nay, mere ashes and food for worms” due to his reluctance to “believe in Christ” (Ep. 67, 923). Although Spinoza intended to leave Burgh’s letter unanswered, friends persuaded him to respond in an attempt to bring their former acquaintance back to his senses. Examining the entire reply would lead us astray, but we must nonetheless pay attention to Spinoza’s invocation of the concept of the ‘Spirit of Christ.’



Indeed, though this letter is not always widely accepted as providing decisive information,<sup>100</sup> Spinoza's reply to Burgh is significant for the following reasons.

First, Spinoza, in the passage discussed below, presents a succinct account of what he considers to be Scripture's most fundamental doctrine, i.e. the idea that men achieve salvation through works of justice and loving-kindness (in what follows I refer to this tenet as 'the doctrine of loving-kindness'). Second, Spinoza explicitly identifies the concept of the 'spirit of Christ' with this doctrine. Third, Spinoza falls back on 1 John 4:13 in support of his claim that salvation is attainable through '*justitia et caritas*' alone. Since Spinoza uses this same verse as motto for the TTP, we have good reasons to examine more closely his use of this passage.<sup>101</sup> Spinoza's reply to Burgh, in other words, launches us right into the heart of Spinoza's reading of Scripture. The salient excerpt reads:

Since we know by this (to quote from the Apostle John, First Epistle, Chapter 4 verse 13) that we dwell in God and God dwells in us, it follows that whatever distinguishes the Roman Church from others is of no real significance, and consequently is constructed merely from superstition. For, as I have said with John, justice and charity are the one sure sign of the true catholic faith, the true fruits of the Holy Spirit, and wherever these are found, there Christ really is, and where they are not Christ is not. For only by the Spirit of Christ can we be led to the love of justice and charity. (Ep. 76, 948)

Spinoza's message to Burgh is straightforward: acts of justice and charity are the only true measures for piety and faith. We can infer that ceremonies (see e.g. TTP 12.19; GIII 162), belief in miracles (see e.g. Ep. 73, 942-43) ghosts (see especially Spinoza's correspondence with Hugo

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<sup>100</sup> Edwin Curley characterizes Spinoza's reply as being primarily "passionate" ("Spinoza's exchange with Albert Burgh", 11). Graeme Hunter defines the context of the letter as "polemical and personal, rather than academic and objective" (*Radical Protestantism in Spinoza's Thought*, 134).

<sup>101</sup> I am of course not denying that Spinoza also uses 1 John 4:13 to point the reader to his metaphysical doctrine of immanence. However, in a letter to Oldenburg, Spinoza clearly acknowledges that his own view about the relation between God and Nature differs from the one commonly defended by Christians: "I entertain an opinion on God and Nature far different from that which modern Christians are wont to uphold. For I maintain that God is the immanent cause, as the phrase is, of all things, and not the transitive cause. All things, I say, are in God and move in God, and this I affirm together with Paul and perhaps together with all ancient philosophers, *though expressed in a different way*, and I would even venture to say, together with all the ancient Hebrews, as far as may be conjectured from certain traditions, though these have suffered much corruption" (Ep. 73, 942; emphasis mine).

Boxel, Ep. 51-56, 893-906), and excessive laws about speculative matters (TTP 14.23; GIII 177) not only are excluded as necessary requisites for attaining the spirit of Christ, they blur the true meaning of Scripture and give rise to superstition. To conduct acts of justice and loving-kindness means to be guided by the ‘spirit of Christ.’

In his opening letter, Burgh had advanced a number of claims in support of what he believes to be the unique superiority of the Catholic Church and Christianity in general. From a moral perspective, Burgh asserts, the Catholic teaching simply is superior in wisdom.<sup>102</sup> Spinoza has little patience with this view. He writes: “unless perchance you have lost your memory together with your reason, you will not be able to deny that in every Church there are very many honourable men who worship God with justice and charity” (Ep. 76, 948). According to Spinoza, holiness of life is not unique to the Roman Church. Throughout history men and woman of various denominations, whether Christian or other, through upright life advocated justice and loving-kindness in the name of religion. What is, however, particular to organized Christianity – and to all forms of organized religion one might say – is its exclusivist tendency according to which there is only one salvific religion. Theologians, Spinoza emphasizes throughout the TTP, anxiously twist their own inventions out of the Biblical texts only to fortify their own position with divine authority (e.g. TTP 7.1-2; GIII 97). Not only do they have the audacity to interpret Scripture in a way that primarily suits their own ambition, they fictitiously ascribe to the texts doctrines that have nothing to do with a benevolent motivation in making the word of God accessible. As a result, Scripture’s principal emphasis on loving-kindness is pushed right into the background, whereas theological disagreement, religious hatred and blind adherence to ceremony and pomp run amok (TTP 7.4; GIII 97). Spinoza reminds Burgh that whatever distinguishes the Roman Church from others – i.e. ceremonies, sacraments, superfluous laws about speculative

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<sup>102</sup> Burgh writes: “innumerable Catholics of both sexes ... have lived admirable and holy lives ... So it can be said that the most perfect heretic or philosopher that ever was can scarcely deserve to rank with the least perfect Catholics. Hence it is also clear, and most evidently follows, that the Catholic teaching is the wisest, and admirable in its profundity - in a word, it is superior to all the other teachings of this world” (Ep. 67, 927).

matters, etc. – “is of no real significance, and consequently is constructed merely from superstition” (Ep. 76, 948).

Throughout the TTP, Spinoza invokes 1 John in support of his claim that charitable behaviour alone is the true sign of Biblical faith. He writes:

John teaches the same thing explicitly in vs. 13 of the same chapter: *by this*, he says, *we know that we remain in him and that he remains in us, because he has given us of his spirit*, viz. Loving-kindness. For he had said previously that God is Loving-kindness, from which (according to his principles, those accepted at that time) he infers that he who has Loving-kindness really has the Spirit of God. Indeed, because no one has seen God, he infers from that that no one is aware of God, or acknowledges God, except by Loving-kindness toward his neighbor, and that in fact no one can come to know any other attribute of God beyond this Loving-kindness, insofar as we participate in it. If these arguments are not decisive, still they explain John's intention clearly enough. But much clearer is 1 John 2:3-4, where he teaches in the most explicit terms what we maintain here. *And by this*, he says, *we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says he knows him and does not keep his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.* (TTP 14.17-18; GIII 175-6)

Spinoza tells us that 1 John adequately captures the true purpose of Scripture as set forward by himself in the TTP. That is, 1 John confirms that only through works of justice and loving-kindness can men achieve salvation and participate in the spirit of Christ. However, 1 John's message, Spinoza tells us, is not limited to a mere celebration of a justification by works. The letter also teaches us that those who come to know God merely through the practice of loving-kindness cannot know any other attribute of God beyond this loving-kindness (insofar as they participate in it). Furthermore, the knowledge of God that manifest itself through the practice of loving-kindness only qualifies as ‘truth’ insofar as those who practice loving-kindness keep their commandments. The spirit of Christ associated with biblical piety not only comes at an intellectual cost, its truthfulness depends solely and entirely on the performance of just and charitable acts.

In the following subsection (4.1.2), I briefly examine Spinoza's use of 1 John in light of the TTP's treatment of biblical obedience. To fully understand Spinoza's meaning, it will be useful to (first) discuss his notion of biblical faith and (second) examine what knowledge Scripture, in Spinoza's opinion, demands from its readers. Specifically, I show that for Spinoza the fundamental teaching of the Bible is a command, whereas, to use Spinoza's own words, the true knowledge of God is a "gift of God" (TTP 13.19; GIII 170). For Spinoza, the presence of Christ within is solely dependent on the practice of justice and loving-kindness; it does not in any way require philosophical knowledge. 1 John, Spinoza tells us, teaches exactly this.

#### 4.1.2 SPINOZA ON PIETY AND OBEDIENCE

First, for Spinoza the Bible is an instrument of obedience and not a source of philosophical truth. Spinoza repeatedly tells us that the central teaching of the Bible is easily discernible: "From Scripture itself we have perceived its most important themes without any difficulty or ambiguity: to love God above all else, and to love your neighbor as yourself" (TTP 12.34; GIII 165).<sup>103</sup> Speculative teachings that concern the specific nature of that God – "whether he is fire, spirit, light, thought, etc." (TTP 14.30; GIII 178) – cannot be counted as belonging to Scripture's eternal doctrine. The Bible does not teach this explicitly, and the prophets themselves disagreed on the matter: "so concerning such things we must maintain nothing as the doctrine of the Holy Spirit" (TTP 7.28; GIII 103).

This is not to say that Scripture teaches nothing about the specific nature of God (TTP 13.6; GIII 168). The point, however, is that the few speculative teachings that consistently run throughout the historical narratives are meant only to enable and facilitate an obedience to the fundamental command of religion (TTP 13.8; GIII/168). Or to put this same claim differently:

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<sup>103</sup> See also TTP 14.24; GIII 177: "I shall not hesitate to enumerate ... the fundamental principles aimed at by the whole of Scripture, all of which ... must tend to this point: that there is a supreme being, who loves Justice and Loving-kindness, and whom everyone, if he is to be saved, is bound to obey and to worship by practicing Justice and Loving-kindness toward his neighbor."

“the only beliefs we are bound by Scriptural command to have are those which are absolutely necessary to carry out this [fundamental] command. So this command itself is the unique standard of the whole universal faith” (TTP 14.10; GIII 174).

In chapter 14 of the TTP, Spinoza sets out the propositional knowledge associated with obedience. The so called “tenets of universal faith” (*fidei universalis dogmata*)<sup>104</sup> – i.e. beliefs about God that are necessary, Spinoza argues, for piety and obedience – are: (1) that there exists a God, (2) that he is one, (3) that he is present everywhere and all things are open to him, (4) that he has supreme right and dominion over all things, (5) that the worship of God and obedience to him consists only in justice and loving-kindness, (6) that all and only those who obey God by living in this way are saved, and (7) that God pardons the sins of those who repent (TTP 14.25-28; GIII 177-8). Their purpose is to teach “that God is supremely just and supremely merciful, *or*, that he is the unique model of the true life” (TTP 13.23; GIII 171). Because, according to Spinoza, Scripture’s teaching ultimately boils down to the *command* to love one’s neighbour, its narratives are means only to obedience, not knowledge per se (TTP 14.7; GIII 174). Spinoza, for this reason, emphasizes that: “God through the Prophets asks no other knowledge of himself from men than the knowledge of his divine Justice and Loving-kindness, i.e., such attributes of God as men can imitate in a certain way of life” (TTP 13.20; GIII 170). Thus, what is crucial about these beliefs that constitute faith is their capacity of supporting and maintaining the practice of obedience. Consider the following statement. Spinoza writes:

we must not for a moment believe that opinions, considered in themselves and without regard to works, have any piety or impiety in them. Instead we should say that a person believes something piously only insofar as his opinions move him to obedience, and impiously only insofar as he takes a license from them to sin or rebel. So, if anyone becomes stiff-necked by believing truths, he really has an impious faith; on the other

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<sup>104</sup> Following Garber (“Should Spinoza have published his philosophy?”, 174) I depart from Curley’s translation. The latter translates this as ‘tenets of the universal faith’. Spinoza emphasizes the flexibility in the understanding of the tenets of faith, problematic for Curley’s translation, which suggests a single universal religion through the use of the definite article ‘the’.

hand, if he becomes obedient by believing falsehoods, he has a pious faith. (TTP 13.29; GIII 172)

Spinoza emphasizes that, as far as faith is concerned, it does not matter whether or not the beliefs that constitute obedience are philosophically true or false. What does matter is that those who hold these beliefs actually believe them to be true.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, “faith requires, not so much true doctrines, as pious doctrines, i.e., doctrines which move the heart to obedience, even if many of them do not have even a shadow of the truth. This is true provided the person who accepts them does not know they are false. If he did, he would necessarily be a rebel” (TTP 14.20; GIII 176).

In short, Spinoza tells us that the tenets of faith are only capable of supporting the practice of obedience when they (individually and collectively) are believed to be true; “If any of these doctrines is taken away, obedience also is destroyed” (TTP 14.29; GIII 178). Put differently: once a person believes these tenets to be true, obedience to God is necessarily posited. Because a sincere belief in these tenets constitutes faith, and faith itself implies obedience to the command to love God and one’s neighbor, works of justice and loving-kindness are the logical consequence of having these opinions. Anyone who genuinely believes these things will defend justice, aid the poor, kill no one, covet nothing which belongs to another, and so on. For Spinoza, the emphasis is on the utility or motivational efficacy in bringing about obedience, rather than veracity of these tenets:

“[Faith] does not explicitly require true doctrines, but only such doctrines as are necessary for obedience, which strengthen our hearts in love towards our neighbors. It is only because of this love that each of us (to speak with John) is in God and that God is in each of us. The faith of each person should be considered pious or impious only on account of

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<sup>105</sup> Schliesser reminds us of the difference between not knowing that something is false and genuinely believing that it is true: “the tenets can be beyond the rationally knowable; they ought to avoid knowable falsehood” Eric Schliesser, ‘Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays’, 825).

his obedience or stubbornness, not on account of its truth or falsity” (TTP 14.22; GIII 176)<sup>106</sup>

Second, although the Bible’s primary goal is to teach obedience, this for Spinoza does not mean that Scripture completely opposes an intellectual approach to religion.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, Spinoza in chapter 4 explains that what the *Ethics* itself identifies as the supreme spiritual good of all men – i.e. the love of God grounded in philosophical understanding<sup>108</sup> – is also expressed in the teachings of certain biblical figures. According to Spinoza’s interpretation, Salomon, Jesus, and Paul are all read as identifying the love of God with a virtuous disposition present in the man who rightly knows God. Spinoza, for instance, refers to Salomon who “calls the human understanding the fountain of true life” (TTP 4.41, GIII 66). He explains that *Proverbs 2:3* clearly shows that according to Solomon “wisdom and knowledge flow from the mouth of God” (TTP 4.44, GIII 67). This is a message consistent with his own opinion, Spinoza tells us: “this is what we ourselves have shown above, viz. that our intellect and our knowledge depend only on the idea *or* knowledge of God, arise only from it, and are perfected only by it” (Ibid.). The Bible, Spinoza asserts, “commends, without reservation, both the natural light and the natural divine law” (TTP 4.50, GIII 68). Now, a man who lives in accordance with the natural divine law is someone who devotes himself “to loving God, not from fear of punishment, nor from love for another thing, such as pleasure or reputation, etc., but only because he knows God, or because he knows that the knowledge and love of God is the highest good” (TTP 4.14, GIII 60). He embraces God’s laws as eternal truths, and spontaneously devotes himself to justice and charity because he understands that this is what reason demands.

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<sup>106</sup> See, for instance, Verbeek, *Spinoza’s Theologico-Political Treatise: Exploring ‘the Will of God’*, 29; Garber, ‘Should Spinoza have published his philosophy’, 172-3; Melamed, ‘The metaphysics of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*’, 135.

<sup>107</sup> In Chapter 19, Spinoza writes that true religion is ‘inscribed by divine agency in men’s hearts, i.e., in the human mind, and that this is the true original text of God, which he himself has stamped with his seal, i.e., with the idea of him, as an image of his divinity’ (TTP 12.2, GIII 158).

<sup>108</sup> See EVp27 & EVp32. For more on Spinoza’s intellectual love of God, see for instance Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*, 147–152; Soyarslan, *Reason and Intuitive Knowledge in Spinoza’s Ethics*, 298-305.

However, the natural divine law – characterized by the precept “to know God and to love him from true freedom” (TTP 4.21, GIII 62) – surpasses the intellectual ability of most people. Spinoza repeatedly notes that “the man of the flesh cannot understand these things” (TTP 4.16, GIII 61). While some people have true knowledge and out of necessity love God, most men lack the ability to live in this manner. As Spinoza puts it: true knowledge of God is a “gift of God” granted only to a minority of men and women (TTP 13.19; GIII 170). The majority of people, however, are guided by immoderate desires and lack the ability to self-legislate. Spinoza at this point reminds us that while Scripture may appeal to a philosophical audience, it was written primarily “for the common people, the uneducated multitude” (TTP 13.27, GIII 172). Because of the latter’s incapability to grasp the natural divine law, God revealed through prophecy the requirements for salvation in a human fashion. “For nothing prevents God from communicating to men in other ways the same things we know by the light of nature” (TTP 1.6, GIII 16). The divine law in the hands of the prophets became anthropomorphized and represented by the image of God as king and lawgiver. God’s decrees no longer are conceived as eternal truths, but presented to the people as if it were the commands of a prince. The love of God ceases to be a virtue and becomes an imperative, an order: to love God is to obey his commandments. The prophets thus preached what Spinoza calls the revealed divine law, and did so in a manner “so that men would embrace the Word of God without any conflict and with their whole heart” (TTP preface §26, GIII 10).

In sum: in the TTP, Spinoza introduces the important distinction between the natural and revealed divine law. Although the Bible does not condemn an intellectual approach to religion, its teachings are directed primarily at the ‘unphilosophical’ multitude: passionate men and woman who – via the anthropomorphic image of God as king or lawgiver – are compelled or stimulated to act in a certain manner. Compliance with the revealed divine law, moreover, is primarily a matter of obedience. Although Scripture, in Spinoza’s opinion, shows awareness that some people may come to love God through knowledge alone, its fundamental teaching is a command.



Let us now return to Spinoza's use of 1 John. As we have seen, Spinoza maintains that 1 John 4 adequately captures the true purpose of Scripture as set forward by Spinoza himself in the TTP.

He writes:

John teaches the same thing explicitly in vs. 13 of the same chapter: *by this*, he says, *we know that we remain in him and that he remains in us, because he has given us of his spirit*, viz. Loving-kindness. For he had said previously that God is Loving-kindness, from which (according to his principles, those accepted at that time) he infers that he who has Loving-kindness really has the Spirit of God. Indeed, because no one has seen God, he infers from that that no one is aware of God, or acknowledges God, except by Loving-kindness toward his neighbour, and that in fact no one can come to know any other attribute of God beyond this Loving-kindness, insofar as we participate in it. If these arguments are not decisive, still they explain John's intention clearly enough. But much clearer is 1 John 2:3-4, where he teaches in the most explicit terms what we maintain here. *And by this*, he says, *we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says he knows him and does not keep his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.* (TTP 14.17-18; GIII 175-6)

We now know that Scripture in Spinoza's opinion only aims at making people obedient. Biblical piety does not require philosophical knowledge of God; on the contrary, the manifestation of Christ within often is characterized by a total absence of knowledge concerning's God's true nature. Spinoza defends this claim more fully in Chapter 13 of the TTP. Significantly, he uses exactly 1 John 4:13 in support of his argument. Before reminding his readers of 'that special passage' where 1 John, "because no one has seen God, ... explains God only through loving-kindness" (TTP 13.22; GIII 171), Spinoza writes:

Someone may say: indeed, it's not necessary to understand God's attributes, but it's quite necessary to believe in them, simply, without any demonstration. But anyone who says this is talking nonsense. Invisible things, and those which are the objects only of the mind, cannot be seen by any other eyes than by demonstrations. Someone who does not have demonstrations does not see anything at all in these things. (TTP 13.17; GIII 170)

Spinoza tells us that in order for us to ‘see’ God, we must necessarily rely on demonstrations. Or to put it in a different way, the only way for us to understand God’s attributes is through intellectual inquiry. However, Scripture’s main goal, as we have seen, is obedience, not knowledge per se. Moreover, the Bible was written primarily “for the common people, the uneducated multitude” (TTP 13.27, GIII 172). Indeed, it is exactly because the author of 1 John addresses the common people – who, Spinoza emphasizes, “for the most part have no knowledge of demonstrations, and cannot give their time to them” (TTP 7.79; GIII 114) – that he explains God through justice and loving-kindness, i.e. such attributes of God men can “take as a model for instituting the true way of life” (TTP 13.24; GIII 171). Spinoza’s claim should not be misunderstood: because Scripture is directed at those who are unable to understand God intellectually, it only teaches attributes of God men are able to imitate in their personal lives.

In sum, Scripture only aims at making men “obedient not learned” (TTP 13.26; GIII 172); only those who keep their commandments, i.e. obey Scripture’s core teaching to love one’s neighbor, can be said to ‘know’ God and participate in his Spirit.<sup>109</sup> The Bible, Spinoza maintains, advocates primarily a justification by works. While it still demands from its readers those beliefs necessary for maintaining the practice of obedience, works of justice and loving-kindness remain the only true measures for piety and faith; according to Spinoza, 1 John teaches exactly the same thing.

#### 4.1.3 SPINOZA ON 1 JOHN 4:13 (CONTINUED)

The question remains as to whether 1 John is actually capable of doing the work Spinoza claims it does. Jonathan Bennett observes that “Spinoza adds a somewhat convoluted account of 1 John 4:13, which he says ‘explicitly’ teaches the doctrine that Spinoza is offering” (Bennett, “Treatise

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<sup>109</sup> See also TTP 14.15; GIII 175: “John says (in 1 John 4:7-8): *whoever loves* (i.e., loves his neighbor) *is born of God and knows God; whoever does not love does not know God, for God is Loving-kindness.*”

on Theology and Politics', 113). Indeed, Spinoza cannot have failed to be aware that his representation would startle, let alone offend, many orthodox Christian readers. As we have seen (see section 3.3 of the previous chapter), 1 John's accusation not only is directed against those who neglect the importance of good conduct; the text identifies both ethical and christological errors. John's first letter centers around the idea that only through a confession of the incarnation, i.e. through a genuine conviction that Jesus is the Christ or that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh," salvation can be obtained (see 1 John 2.18-27 and 4.1-3). 1 John's concern is to warn against those who abnegate this truth, and hereby deceive themselves and others: "Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?" (I John 2:22). Only through a recognition that Jesus is the incarnation of God's own Word can the pathway to the Kingdom of God be opened. Or to put it differently: to know Christ according to the Spirit, is to regard Jesus as the risen, universal savior. Spinoza, however, straightforwardly denies the Incarnation. In a letter to Oldenburg, he writes:

As to the additional teaching of certain Churches, that God took upon himself human nature, I have expressly indicated that I do not understand what they say. Indeed, to tell the truth, they seem to me to speak no less absurdly than one who might tell me that a circle has taken on the nature of a square. (Ep. 73, 943)

Spinoza's reliance of 1 John clearly is not without irony. More importantly, Spinoza's use of I John is indicative of the way he gradually alters the meaning of traditional theological concepts.<sup>110</sup> While, according to I John 2:22, "the Antichrist, [is] the one who denies the Father and the Son," this is an outlook with which Spinoza has no patience. The TTP makes it perfectly clear that "the real Antichrists" are "those who persecute honest men who love Justice, because they disagree with them, and do not defend the same doctrines of faith they do" (TTP 14.9; GIII 176). The antichrist is someone who advocates a form of theological discipline that no longer takes the

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<sup>110</sup> Levene considers this strategy one of Spinoza's "principal methods of philosophizing" ('Ethics and Interpretation, or How to Study Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus Without Strauss', 95).

doctrine of justice and charity as the only measure for piety and faith.<sup>111</sup> By conflating essential with non-essential tenets, the Spinozistic antichrist blurs the true meaning of Scripture. He puts religion in service of doctrinal purity and persecutes those with dissenting opinions (TTP 14.19; GIII 176). Significantly, the TTP presents this conclusion following a discussion of I John itself.

So far our inquiries revealed the following information. Spinoza presents 1 John 4:13 in support of his claim that men achieve salvation through justice and charity alone. According to Spinoza, this verse highlights above all the intended audience of Scripture – the ‘uneducated multitude’ – and the Bible’s primary intention of teaching these men in accordance with their limited capacities. Spinoza’s reading of this letter is unorthodox in at least one other important aspect. Whereas 1 John traditionally is taken as providing important Scriptural basis for a belief in Christ’s resurrection, the TTP uses exactly this letter to exclude – albeit implicitly – a belief in the historical Jesus from the knowledge required for salvation (we will return to his point shortly). Spinoza, in other words, uses 1 John to put forward a radically revised understanding of the incarnation: the ‘spirit of Christ’ manifests itself in those who conduct acts of justice and loving-kindness.

#### 4.2 SPINOZA ON SPIRITUAL CHRIST: PATHS TO SALVATION

According to Spinoza’s interpretation of Scripture, accurate knowledge of God is not at all necessary for salvation. As we have seen, Spinoza is adamant that works of justice and loving-kindness alone testify to one’s faith. Put differently, the manifestation of *Christ within* associated with pious biblical obedience does not require philosophical knowledge. As we will see in this section, Spinoza simultaneously identifies philosophy itself as providing an alternative route for achieving the spirit of Christ. Those who possess a clear and distinct conception of God and use that knowledge for the benefit of man also have the spirit of Christ within them. Having

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<sup>111</sup> For more on Spinoza’s ‘AntiChrist’, see especially Laerke ‘Is Spinoza the Anti-Calvin? Religious perspectives on the TTP’.

established in this section Spinoza's divergent use of the concept of the spirit of Christ (associated with both an intellectualist and non-intellectualist appreciation of God's nature), we will then discuss Spinoza's motivations for subsuming under one category what appear to be highly incompatible approaches to the practice of justice and loving-kindness.

In his reply to Oldenburg's inquiry mentioned at the beginning of the previous section. Spinoza takes up the distinction between 'Christ according to the spirit' and 'Christ according to flesh.'

He writes:

... for salvation it is not altogether necessary to know Christ according to the flesh; but with regard to the eternal son of God, that is, God's eternal wisdom, which has manifested itself in all things and chiefly in the human mind, and most of all in Christ Jesus, a very different view must be taken. For without this no one can attain to a state of blessedness, since this alone teaches what is true and false, good and evil. [*dico ad salutem non esse omnino necesse **Christum, secundum carnem** noscere; sed de aeterno illo Dei filio, hoc est **Dei aeterna sapientia**, quae sese in omnibus rebus, et maxime in mente humana et maxime in mente Christi Jesu manifestavit, longe aliter sentiendum. Nam nemo absque hac ad statum beatitudinis potest pervenire, utpote quae sola docet, quid verum & falsum, bonum & malum sit*]. (Ep. 73, 943, emphasis mine)

Spinoza explicitly delineates two dimensions of Christ: the historical figure, Jesus the man who suffered and died (TTP 12.39; GIII 166), which he identifies with 'Christ according to the flesh'; and the 'eternal son of God' or 'God's eternal wisdom', manifested as knowledge which leads one to blessedness.<sup>112</sup> Two observations are in place here.

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<sup>112</sup> For the distinction between 'Christ according to the spirit' and 'Christ according to the flesh', see also Matheron (*Le Christ et le salut des Ignorants chez Spinoza*, 7) and Melamed ('Christus secundum spiritum': Spinoza, Jesus and the infinite intellect', 141). It should be noted that in this passage, Spinoza distinguishes between knowledge required for salvation (*salus*) and knowledge required for blessedness (*beatitudo*). In light of Spinoza's explicit association of blessedness in the *Ethics* with the intellectual love of God (e.g. EVp42dem), and the TTP's systematic use of salvation within a primarily Christian context, it is tempting to place the former notion on a higher (normative) level than the latter. After all, as Spinoza puts it, "everyone, without exception, can obey. But only a very few (compared with the whole human race) acquire a virtuous disposition from the guidance of reason alone" (TTP 15.44; GIII 188). Nonetheless,

First, Spinoza confirms that salvation does not require any acquaintance with the biblical narratives that testify to the life of Jesus (see also TTP 12.30; GIII 164). Whereas Spinoza, as we shall discuss in the following chapter, still attributes a certain uniqueness to the man Jesus, belief in the latter's 'incarnation and atonement' is excluded from the knowledge required for salvation. Indeed, Spinoza excludes faith in Christ's resurrection and atonement from belonging to the essential dogma's of faith. The depreciating of Jesus' uniqueness as 'divine mediator of the world' typical of Spinoza's treatment of 1 John again presents himself. By doing so, Spinoza distances himself from Hobbes who considers 'faith in Christ' a necessary condition for salvation (Leviathan, Ch. 43, 398). Significantly, Hobbes explicitly falls back on 1 John to make this exact point clear: "For if he believe that "Jesus is the Christ, he hath the Spirit of God" (1 John [5]:1) "and God dwelleth in him, and he in God" (1 John 4:15) ... He that believeth it not is no Christian" (Ibid., III, Ch. 42, 348).

Second, to be guided by the 'spirit of Christ' presupposes the possession of knowledge that leads one to the love of justice and charity, and consequently, blessedness. Spinoza's description of this gradually actualizing wisdom in all things is what the next few textual excerpts from Spinoza's corpus deal with, because it is not entirely clear at this point what 'wisdom' he could be referring to.

From his reply to Burgh we know that Spinoza associates the spirit of Christ with exemplary moral behaviour; the concept seems to relate primarily to knowledge that incites people to act justly.<sup>113</sup> However, as already mentioned in Chapter 3, other passages from the TTP indicate that the aim of this knowledge is not so narrow as it seems. Indeed, in Chapter 4 of the TTP, Spinoza discusses *Romans 8:9* in which Paul taught his disciples that "no one becomes blessed unless he has in himself the mind of Christ", he adds "by which he perceives God's laws

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while it is correct to distinguish blessedness and salvation epistemologically, Spinoza often uses these terms interchangeably.

<sup>113</sup> Recall Ep. 76, 948: "For, as I have said with John, justice and charity are the one sure sign of the true catholic faith, the true fruits of the Holy Spirit, and wherever these are found, there Christ really is, and where they are not Christ is not. For only by the Spirit of Christ can we be led to the love of justice and charity."

as eternal truths” (TTP 4.36; GIII 65). At the beginning of that same chapter Spinoza already hinted at the meaning of these so-called eternal truths. While discussing the difference between human and divine laws, Spinoza states that “a law which depends on a necessity of nature is one which follows necessarily from the very nature *or* definition of a thing” (TTP 4.1; GIII 57).<sup>114</sup> Eternal truths about substance are truths that follow necessarily from the very nature or definition of substance (see e.g. TTP 4.1; GIII 57). That is, they are logically necessary truths that are timelessly true. Spinoza claims that finite modes do not always grasp these truths. However, once people become aware of them – once these eternal truths are affirmed in their mind – they will, at least in principle,<sup>115</sup> never be able to deny or doubt their veracity again (see EIIp43s on the self-certifying nature of the truths of reason). The spirit of Christ thus relates to the entire corpus of adequate knowledge of nature. He who has the ‘spirit of Christ’ within him participates in divine understanding and has at his disposal a number of unshakeable truths about substance.

This idea is corroborated by Spinoza’s subsequent discussion of Solomon’s *Proverbs*. Spinoza tells us that *Proverbs* 2:3 clearly shows that according to Solomon “wisdom and knowledge flow from the mouth of God.” (TTP 4.44; GIII 67). This is a message that permeates Spinoza’s works: “our understanding and our knowledge depend only on the idea *or* knowledge of God, arise only from it, and are perfected only by it” (Ibid.). Now, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza equates the ‘idea of God’ (*idea Dei*) with God’s ‘infinite intellect’ which comprehends “God’s attributes and his affections” (EIIp4d). According to Spinoza, the infinite intellect is the immediate infinite mode of thought.<sup>116</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, Spinoza’s account of infinite modes is ambiguous to say the least. What matters here, however, is that God’s infinite

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<sup>114</sup> See also Spinoza’s more explicit definition of eternal truths in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*: “By an eternal truth I mean one which, if it is affirmative, will never be able to be negative. Thus it is a first and eternal truth that ‘God is’, but that ‘Adam thinks’ is not an eternal truth. That ‘there is no Chimera’ is an eternal truth, but not that ‘Adam does not think’” (TIE, 15).

<sup>115</sup> I am not claiming that Spinoza does not allow forgetting. People can be transformed in case of accidents or illness. See especially EIVp39s.

<sup>116</sup> See also the *Short Treatise* where Spinoza writes: “Now, as regards the *general Natura naturata*, or the modes, or creations which depend on, or have been created by, God immediately, of these we know no more than two, namely, *motion* in matter, and the *understanding* in the thinking thing” (ST, 58).

intellect contains adequate ideas of everything.

Furthermore, we have also noted that in the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza calls the infinite intellect – i.e. the mode of understanding immediately dependent on God – the ‘Son of God.’<sup>117</sup> When in his reply to Oldenburg Spinoza identifies the spirit of Christ with ‘the eternal son of God’ or God’s eternal wisdom, he thus equates it with nothing else than God’s infinite intellect. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza too explicitly equates the ‘spirit of Christ’ with the idea of God. He writes that a person who is “guided by the Spirit of Christ” is guided by nothing else than “the idea of God, on which alone it depends that man should be free, and desire for other men the good he desires for himself” (EIVp68s). In short, the spirit of Christ is described as the idea of God, understood in turn as God’s infinite intellect. Melamed, for this reason, concludes that ‘Christ according to the spirit’ is nothing but Spinoza’s infinite intellect, which harbors all eternal truths:

Indeed, without the infinite intellect one cannot attain the state of blessedness, which is the affect accompanying the identification with the infinite intellect. The infinite intellect defines what is true and false (it is the totality of truth), and the achievement of full identification with the infinite intellect (i.e., a complete knowledge of God), is man’s true *summum bonum*.” (“Christus secundum spiritum”: Spinoza, Jesus and the infinite intellect’, 150, n. 3)<sup>118</sup>

We can add that the ethical dimension of the ‘spirit of Christ’ are those just acts that follow from this knowledge.<sup>119</sup> Ethics and politics, Spinoza asserts, “are entirely consistent with natural knowledge. For that knowledge teaches Ethics and true virtue, after we have acquired knowledge of things and tasted the excellence of knowledge” (I<sup>TP</sup> 4.46; GIII 68). The spirit of Christ thus

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<sup>117</sup> He writes: “As regards the Understanding in the thinking thing, this, like the first, is also a Son, Product, or immediate Creation of God, also created by him from all eternity, and remaining immutable to all eternity. It has but one function, namely, to understand clearly and distinctly all things at all times” (ST, 59).

<sup>118</sup> For a similar view, see Fraenkel, ‘Could Spinoza Have Presented the *Ethics* as the True Content of the Bible’, 4. While I completely accept this intellectualist reading of the spirit of Christ, it only captures one dimension of this concept. Spinoza provides sufficient evidence that the spirit of Christ is not reserved for the intellectual elite alone. This will be discussed more fully in the following section.

<sup>119</sup> “In a letter to Jarig Jelles, Spinoza writes that “he who has the Spirit of Christ is necessarily impelled only to the good” (Ep. 48B, 890).



signifies the aggregate of adequate knowledge of nature, i.e. the idea of God; such knowledge inspires in the man of reason a desire for justice and loving-kindness. Someone who dedicates himself to the good solely on the basis of this knowledge, i.e. through rational belief leads a moral life, has the spirit of Christ within him. Consequently, this person needs no instruction by the Bible: “someone who is completely unfamiliar with these narratives, and nevertheless has salutary opinions and a true manner of living, is completely blessed and really has the Spirit of Christ in him” (TTP 5.46; GIII 79).<sup>120</sup>

However, Spinoza’s reply to Burgh clearly includes the suggestion that Christ according to the spirit is found not only in the intellectual elite, but also in men who act from the doctrine of loving-kindness without a robust collection of adequate knowledge. Christians who devote themselves to justice and charity – and hereby, according to Spinoza, exhibit “the one sure sign of the true catholic faith” – also have the spirit of Christ within them (Ep. 76, 948). Evidence that the spirit of Christ is manifested in those who act justly through earnest, Christian obedience, is found also in the TTP. While discussing the final, seventh, dogma of faith (viz. that God pardons the sins of those who repent) Spinoza writes that: “whoever firmly believes that God, out of mercy and the grace by which he directs everything, pardons men's sins, and who for this reason is more inspired by the love of God, that person really knows Christ according to the Spirit, and Christ is in him” (TTP 14.28; GIII 178). This is not to say that the spirit of Christ is reserved only for ‘true’ Christians. In his letter to Burgh, Spinoza explains that men of all denominations can attain it: “As for the Turks and the other Gentiles, if they worship God by the exercise of justice and by love of their neighbour, I believe that they possess the spirit of Christ and are saved” (Ep. 43, 881). The Spirit of Christ thus manifests itself in three distinct groups of people: (a) those who act justly out of intellectual enlightenment, (b) those who through faith – i.e. through a genuine belief in the dogmas of faith in the case of Judaism and Christianity – are inspired towards justice and charity, and (c) those “Turks and other Gentiles’ who are moved by

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<sup>120</sup> The implications of this move are far reaching. It follows not only that people can have Spirit of Christ in non-Christian polities, but also that the Bible may be dispensable in the right kind of society.

their books to loving-kindness.

This fact confronts us with a serious interpretative puzzle. Spinoza explicitly associates the spirit of Christ with, foremost, a desire for just and charitable actions. The TTP, however, outlines two very distinct ways of ‘knowing God’ as means to this end. Salvation or blessedness is attainable not only through an adequate comprehension of God’s nature and the desire for sociability it entails, but also through pious belief in the Biblical doctrine of justice and loving-kindness grounded in an anthropomorphic conception of God. Given Spinoza’s sustained critique of anthropomorphism on the one hand, and his repeated insistence that “our supreme good, not only depends on the [adequate] knowledge of God, but consists entirely in it” (TTP 4.12; GIII 60) on the other, one is left wondering how Spinoza is able to maintain that faithful believers also can attain salvation.

#### 4.3. SPINOZA ON KNOWLEDGES OF GOOD AND EVIL

Renewed attention to Spinoza’s description of the spirit of Christ presented in the letter to Oldenburg provides clarification. He writes that the knowledge associated with this concept is necessary for blessedness “since this [knowledge] alone teaches what is true and false, good and evil [*utpote quae sola docet, quid verum & falsum, bonum & malum sit*]” (Ep. 73, 943). In what follows, I argue that Spinoza is not saying that (a) ‘knowledge of what is true and false’ is conceptually identical to (b) ‘knowledge of what is good and evil’.<sup>121</sup> That is, Spinoza can be read as saying that there are two different bodies of knowledge that allow us to attain blessedness.

First, Spinoza’s Latin does not suggest an identification of the ‘true and false’ with the ‘good and evil.’ If Spinoza wanted to stress the identity between (a) and (b), it would have made more sense for him to use «*sive* ». Second and more importantly, there are reasons internal to the text (both *Ethics* and TTP) for differentiating between (a) knowledge that teaches what is true and

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<sup>121</sup> Although ‘malum’ could equally be translated as ‘bad’, I chose to follow both Curley (*The Collected Works of Spinoza, Vol. I*) and Shirley (*Spinoza: Complete works*) who consistently translate it as ‘evil’.

false and (b) knowledge that teaches what is good and evil. I claim that this distinction is valid since it corresponds to another distinction present in the *Ethics*, namely that between ‘true knowledge of good and evil’ and ‘knowledge of good and evil’ – without the ‘true’ –a which I will here call ‘*purported* knowledge of good and evil’.<sup>122</sup> The argument in this section proceeds in the following steps.

First, I show that Spinoza associates ‘true knowledge of good and evil’ with value judgments grounded primarily in reason, whereas purported ‘knowledge of good and evil’ is related to evaluative processes grounded mainly in the passions. The difference between both judgments is captured in the distinction between an ethical life dominated by the striving towards the ideal of the Spinozistic ‘free man,’ and moral lifestyles (exemplars) dominated by the pursuit of more transitory goods like e.g. honor, reward, sensual pleasure, and wealth.<sup>123</sup>

Second, I argue that for Spinoza purported ‘knowledge of good and evil’ in some cases is particularly effective in bringing about behavioral changes. I show that the passions that ground the evaluative judgments associated with purported ‘knowledge of good and evil’ have the capacity to overrule other affects that are less motivationally effective.

Third, I argue that the tenets of faith exemplify a body of knowledge that qualifies as purported ‘knowledge of good and evil.’ I show that Scripture provides men with the image of God the lawgiver, a passion-based exemplar that relies instrumentally on the hopes and fears of the multitude in order to suppress other more destructive passions. Hence, I argue that the psychological mechanism behind purported ‘knowledge of good and evil’ described in the *Ethics*, corresponds to the psychological mechanism behind theological obedience described in the TTP.

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<sup>122</sup> I am definitely not the first to call attention to this qualification. See e.g. Rosenthal (‘Politics and Ethics in Spinoza: The Problem of Normativity’, 90) and De Dijn (‘Ethics IV: the ladder, not the top. The provisional morals of the philosopher’, 8). Both authors relate ‘true knowledge of good and evil’ to Spinoza’s discussion of the exemplar of the free man (EIVp67-73) and the freedom depicted in the picture of a really rational life (EIVp59-66). My goal in this section is to focus primarily on Spinoza’s discussion of what I call *purported* knowledge of good and evil.

<sup>123</sup> It may be useful to think of the opening pages of the TIE where Spinoza describes the difference between objectives commonly pursued by men (riches, honor, and sensual pleasure) and the ‘true good’ and ‘true knowledge of things’ of the philosopher.

That is, the tenets of faith describe a body of inadequate knowledge that teaches men purported knowledge of good and evil; knowledge particularly successful in bringing about a desire for justice and loving-kindness.

A reading of Spinoza's letter to Oldenburg that takes into account the distinction between 'true knowledge of good and evil' and *purported* 'knowledge of good and evil' allows us to make full sense of Spinoza's divergent use of the 'spirit of Christ. First, the spirit of Christ can be identified with the aggregate of adequate knowledge of nature, i.e. the idea of God. Such knowledge inspires in the man of reason a love of justice and loving-kindness. Second, the spirit of Christ can also be identified with a body of inadequate knowledge, i.e. *purported* 'knowledge of good and evil' equally able of inciting in men a desire for justice and loving-kindness. In the TTP, Spinoza presents a redefined version of revealed religion – exemplified by the tenets of faith – which qualifies a such a body of knowledge.

#### 4.3.1 SPINOZA ON MORAL PSYCHOLOGY AND EXEMPLARS

In order to come to this conclusion we must (first) briefly address certain features of Spinoza's description of ethical language. What is important is that for Spinoza 'good' and 'evil' are nothing but subjective value judgments. They "indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we compare things to one another" (EIV, preface). Spinoza's main point is that the value judgments people have above all are indications of their own affective dispositions. He writes:

we desire nothing because we judge it to be good, but on the contrary, we call it good because we desire it. Consequently, what we are averse to we call evil. So each one, from his own affect, judges, *or* evaluates, what is good and what is bad, what is better and what is worse, and finally, what is best and what *is* worst. ... And so, each one, from his own affect, judges a thing good or bad, useful or useless. (EIIIp39s)

According to Spinoza, human existence is characterized by a fundamental desire to preserve one's own being (EIIIp6). Men, however, have widely divergent opinions concerning those things which they believe to be beneficial or detrimental to that striving. Spinoza, for instance, explains that 'the ambitious man' will regard esteem by others as the most valuable object to be pursued, whereas 'the greedy man' primarily considers abundance in money as conducive to his wellbeing. Since joy and sadness are this desire itself insofar as it is increased or diminished by external causes (EIIIp57d), the former (i.e. the ambitious man), by consequence, experiences joy in the accumulation of worldly honour, the latter (i.e. the greedy man) sadness in losing money. Human beings thus apply the notions of 'good' and 'evil' to those things that affect *them* with either desire or aversion. And since one and the same thing can be 'good' for one while 'bad/evil' for another (see EIIIp51s and EIV, preface), value judgements necessarily are characterized by a high level of relativity (e.g. Garrett, 'Spinoza's ethical theory', 273 and Nadler, *Spinoza's Ethics: An Introduction*, 216). Spinoza, however, is reluctant to reject these terms outright:

But though this is so, still we must retain these words. For because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful to us to retain these same words with the meaning I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. (EIV, preface)

According to Spinoza, good and evil are evaluative notions which indicate an object's relation to a certain standard or model. The greedy man, for instance, values above all the accumulation of money since he perceives this object as the quintessential means to achieve wellbeing. Consequently, he sets before himself the ideal of the rich man as a model according to which he judges the value of external objects. These and similar passion-based ideals, however, differ from person to person. Spinoza, in the passage above, now argues for the acceptance of a model of human nature that can serve as a more objective standard of good and bad (Rosenthal, 'Why

Spinoza Chose the Hebrews', 229); a model according to which we are able to value things as being *certain* means by which we may approach nearer to that model<sup>124</sup> There is, in other words, a specific model of human life that represents a perfection of human nature. In EIVp67-73, Spinoza identifies this model of human nature with the ideal of the so-called 'free man.' This free man represents someone "who is led by reason alone [and] ... has only adequate ideas" (EIVp68d). The free man is someone who's judgements about good and evil are grounded in rational perception alone, i.e. his value judgments are based solely on an adequate understanding of what is truly beneficial for man.

The ideal of the perfectly free and rational man itself is imaginary and inadequate (see e.g. Garber, 'Dr. Fishelson's Dilemma', 196-7, 202; Rosenthal, 'Spinoza and the philosophy of history', 125). Our lack of power over and against nature – for it is impossible that a man "should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone" (EIVp4) – makes us subjective to passions. Spinoza's point, however, is that the man of reason who takes the 'free man' as exemplar realizes or understands that his happiness ultimately depends on the accumulation of adequate ideas. He is aware that the more adequate knowledge he has of himself, of his surrounding world, and the way passions influence him, the more his activity and freedom are increased. His ideas and actions no longer will be determined solely by the way external objects randomly act upon him, instead he will strive as much as possible to let his own nature – i.e. reason – become the cause of his thoughts and actions. Spinoza tells us that the more we act according to our own nature – i.e. the more virtuous and free we become – the more we preserve our own being. Spinoza's proposed model of human nature equates reason, virtue and self-preservation. Since virtue – i.e. acting freely according to our own nature – and reason necessarily aim at self-preservation, we can be sure that whatever we do from virtue and reason will also be 'good' for us (e.g. Don Garrett, 'Spinoza's ethical theory', 292-3).

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<sup>124</sup> See also TTP 16.11-13; GIII 191 where Spinoza distinguishes between the advantage (*utile*) that all human beings pursue and "the true advantage of men" (*verum hominum utile*) sought by those who "live according to the laws and certain dictates of our reason". See Rutherford, 'Spinoza and the Dictates of Reason', 498).

The difference between a model of human nature grounded in reason alone, and human exemplars which correspond mainly to a passionate, subjective ways of judging things is captured in the distinction between Spinoza's use of (a) 'true knowledge of good and evil' (EIVp14 and onwards) and (b) 'knowledge of good and evil' – without the 'true' – which we have called *purported* 'knowledge of good and evil' (see e.g. EIVp8). According to Spinoza, the free man judges as good only those things which will necessarily contribute to an increasing wellbeing of himself and others. See, for instance, EIVp35d (emphasis mine): "because *what we judge to be good or evil when we follow the dictate of reason must be good or evil* (by IIP41), it follows that insofar as men live according to the guidance of reason, they must do only those things which are good for human nature, and hence, for each man." Consequently, such people are guided by 'true knowledge of good and evil' since their evaluative judgments are grounded in adequate ideas alone.<sup>125</sup> This, however, does not hold for the exemplars men usually set before themselves. In the case of the greedy or ambitious man, 'good' and 'evil' follow merely from a subjective appreciation of the way certain objects affect them. However, what is good for the greedy man differs from what is good for the ambitious man. Consequently, there is no correspondence between what is objectively true and false, and what they perceive to be good and evil. There is, in other words, a difference between their *purported* 'knowledge of good and evil' and 'true knowledge of good and evil'.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> See, for instance, De Dijn: "This knowledge of good and bad is called true knowledge, not simply because it just happens to correspond to what is really useful to us or not ... It is called true because it is based on reason (as is clear e.g. from the demonstration of EIVp15). Therefore it is inappropriate to call it inadequate or to equate it with knowledge of the first kind" ('Ethics IV: the ladder, not the top', 8). I would add, however, that this does not mean that imagination has no role to play in the application of reason's dictates to daily life. As Steinberg has aptly put it, the exemplar of the free man ultimately functions "as a kind of Trojan Horse through which reason infiltrates and colonizes the imagination" ('Following a *Recta Ratio Vivendi?*, 196). Indeed, a proper application of the relatively indeterminate and uninformative 'general' precepts of reason relies crucially on the resources and practices of memory and imagination.

<sup>126</sup> See also Rutherford: "Spinoza aims to preserve a distinction between how we are naturally determined to act in pursuing or advantage and how we might act in pursuing our 'true advantage', in accordance with the dictated of reason" ('Spinoza and the Dictates of Reason', 498-490).

#### 4.3.2 THE USES OF PURPORTED KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL

That is not to say (second) that passion-based exemplars may not contribute to one's self-preservation. What is important about purported 'knowledge of good and evil' is that it entails, in the person who holds it, the cognition that certain objects affect him or her with joy or sadness respectively (EIVp8). In cases where these affects – e.g. love of honour or hate of disgrace – are deeply ingrained in people's minds, they often have the ability to overpower other affects which are less motivationally effective. That is, a fundamental principle of Spinoza's psychological theory holds that "an affect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affect opposite to, and stronger than, the affect to be restrained" (EIVp7). The greedy man will, for instance, be motivated to quit smoking merely because the pleasure he derives from it is unable to compete with the loss of money that goes along with it. 'Knowledge of good and evil' that is not *'true knowledge of good and evil'* in some individual cases may contribute to self-preservation.

#### 4.3.3 THE TENETS OF FAITH AS EMBODIMENTS OF PURPORTED KNOWLEDGE OF GOOD AND EVIL

If we now (third) redirect attention to the dogmas of faith discussed earlier in section 1, we see that they qualify exactly as such a body of knowledge. As we have seen, Spinoza emphasizes that theological obedience requires people to believe that God systematically punishes those who live under the control of the pleasures (tenet VI). Furthermore, to be faithful, one must believe that God is everywhere and sees everything (tenet III); no one can escape God's all-seeing eye. Fear of punishment and hope for reward both are fundamental motivating factors for theological obedience. Or to put it in a different way, the dogmas of faith always incite one to hope (for divine reward) or fear (for divine punishment).<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Garber reaches a similar conclusion: "the fear of what will happen to us after death, fear of punishment and the coordinate hope of heaven, is a primary motivation for the common man to behave in accordance



In proposition 47 of Part IV, Spinoza argues that in certain unique circumstances, hope and fear can play a constructive role. He writes that “affects [of hope and fear] cannot be good of themselves, but only insofar as they can restrain an excess of joy” (EIVp47). He refers back to EIVp43, where he writes that excessive pleasures are evil because they prevent the body from being affected in a great many other ways. This in turn (by EIVp38 & EIVp26-7) prevents one from making better use of his or her rational potential. This seems to be Spinoza’s position. People are often so fixated on their bodily pleasures that they no longer are useful to themselves. In this scenario, hope and fear can still be valuable because they have the ability to make us reconsider our true priorities. Fear of sickness or death can, for instance, stimulate a smoker to reconsider his destructive habit. Now, at a certain moment Spinoza calls excessive greed, ambition and lust “species of madness” (EIVp44s).<sup>128</sup> Therefore, we can safely assume that such passions qualify as evils that can be restrained by ‘good’ hopes and fears.

If we now have a look at the crucial tenet VI of the dogmata things become much clearer. According to Spinoza, a person of faith will always genuinely believe that those who live under the control of the pleasures will be lost.<sup>129</sup> The reason why he obeys God, and not his own indulgences, is because he believes that a life devoted to bodily pleasures would jeopardize his chances of salvation; he will, for instance, fear the consequences of sexual promiscuity (or hope for reward in case of moderation) and therefore suppress excessive lust. My point is that the psychological mechanism behind theological obedience mirrors exactly the principle described in the *Ethics*: faith’s reliance on the hopes and fears of the multitude is instrumentally good because of its ability to prevent the person in question from a bigger evil. The same psychological

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with morality.” See his “A Free Man ‘Thinks of Nothing Less Than of Death’: Spinoza on the Eternity of the Mind”, 112.

<sup>128</sup> EIVp44s: “But when a greedy man thinks of nothing else but profit, or money, and an ambitious man of esteem, they are not thought to be mad, because they are usually troublesome and are considered worthy of hate. But greed, ambition, and lust are really are species of madness, even though they are not numbered among the diseases.”

<sup>129</sup> Spinoza formulates tenet VI as follows: “VI. *Everyone who obeys God by living in this way* [viz. in Justice and Loving-kindness, or in love towards one's neighbor] *is saved; the rest, who live under the control of pleasures, are lost.* He adds: “If men did not firmly believe this, there would be no reason why they should prefer to obey God rather than pleasures” (I TP 14.27; GIII 177-8).

mechanism is described at the end of the *Ethics*. In EVp41, Spinoza expresses his frustration about the absurd beliefs commonly associated with religion. He scrutinizes the multitude's belief in heaven and hell, yet simultaneously realizes how absurd ideas like this are especially capable of restraining the common man's bodily pleasures. He writes that "if men did not have this hope and fear (...) they would return to their natural disposition, and would prefer to govern all their actions according to lust" (EVp41s). This suggests that for Spinoza theological obedience mainly is characterized by its advantageous use of the ductility of the multitude. By working on their fears and hopes, the biblical image of God as king or lawgiver stimulates people to act in accordance with their supposedly true interests.<sup>130</sup> The tenets of faith, in other words, qualify as a body of inadequate propositional knowledge that teaches religious adherents *purported* 'knowledge of good and evil'; knowledge particularly effective in bringing about a love of justice and loving-kindness.

To summarize our activities in this section. If we take the distinction between 'true knowledge of good and evil' and purported "knowledge of good and evil" serious, Spinoza's description of the concept of the spirit of Christ in his letter to Oldenburg allows for a more nuanced analysis. Spinoza claims that the knowledge associated with this concept is necessary for blessedness "since this alone teaches what is true and false, good and evil" (Ep. 73, 943). This paves the way for a two-fold reading of 'spirit of Christ'. We can identify the spirit of Christ with the idea of God or God's infinite intellect which defines what is true and false, and, by consequence, gives – or at the least projects – *true* knowledge of good and evil. On the other hand, the spirit of Christ can be identified with a body of knowledge that teaches *purported* knowledge of good and evil able to incite in men a desire for justice and loving-kindness. The biblical (passion-based) exemplar of god as 'supremely just and merciful' lawgiver presented in the TTP qualifies as such a body of knowledge.

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<sup>130</sup> To be clear: while superstition exploits man's natural hopes and fears for the vainglory of one man, one class, or a clergy gone astray, Spinoza's version of faith utilizes these same affect to promote loving-kindness and strengthen unity among a non-philosophical multitude.

#### 4.4 SPINOZA ON 'WISDOM OF DOCTRINE'

This section examines Spinoza's use of the notion 'wisdom of doctrine.' It argues that Spinoza invokes the term as a means to highlight the fine line between a constructive and destructive use of passion-based exemplars and the purported knowledge of good and evil on which they are grounded. Although all passion-based exemplars that successfully inspire a love of justice and charity qualify as pedagogical tools that lead people towards the 'spiritual Christ', the biblical image of God for Spinoza has been proven most effective at achieving this goal. However, contrary to the model of human nature grounded in 'certainly useful' knowledge (EIVD1), passion-based exemplars often enhance rather than subdue superstitious belief. Spinoza, for this reason, argues that the successful proliferation of 'Christ within' – here understood in its non-intellectualist guise, i.e. as manifested by the striving towards the exemplar of God as king or lawgiver – always requires the careful eye of the civil state.

In his correspondence with Oldenburg, Spinoza invokes the concept of 'wisdom of doctrine' (*doctrinae sapientia*). Being reminded by Oldenburg that many Christians were likely to be offended by the TTP's discussion of miracles, he writes:

... as to miracles, I am on the contrary convinced that the certainty of divine revelation can be based solely on the **wisdom of doctrine**, and not on miracles, that is, on ignorance, as I have shown at some length in Chapter 6, 'On Miracles'. Here I will add only this, that the chief distinction I make between religion and superstition is that the latter is founded on ignorance, the former on wisdom. And this I believe is the reason why Christians are distinguished from other people not by faith, nor charity, nor the other fruits of the Holy Spirit, but solely by an opinion they hold, namely, because, as they all do, they rest their case simply on miracles, that is, on ignorance, which is the source of all wickedness, and thus, they turn their faith, true as it may be, into superstition. (Ep. 73, 942-3; emphasis mine)

Spinoza encourages Oldenburg to understand that Christianity does not hold single possessorship of faith, let alone exercise monopoly on works of justice and charity. What is, however, particular to Christianity is its tendency to advocate certain beliefs which, according to Spinoza, turn revealed religion – ‘true as it may be’ – into superstitious ignorance. As we have seen, Spinoza explicitly excludes belief in Christ’s incarnation from the tenets of faith necessary for salvation. While beliefs like this in some individual cases might move people towards more devotion, in the end they only contribute to a confusion about Scripture’s core message. By confounding essential with non-essential tenets, Christianity loses sight of what is important: emphasis is put on doctrinal purity rather than works of charity. The ‘wisdom of doctrine’ Spinoza associates with revealed religion in this way decays into superstitious ignorance.

Two important considerations are in place here. First, though Spinoza’s refined version of revealed religion – exemplified by the tenets of faith – embodies the false and anthropomorphic idea of God as lawgiver, for Spinoza, it cannot on this account be reduced to ignorance. Second, the ‘wisdom of doctrine’ associated with it only turns into ignorance when miraculous opinions are superadded to the essential dogmas. Although Spinoza in his reply to Oldenburg does not give any explicit reason for attributing to his version of revealed religion ‘doctrinary wisdom’, it is not too difficult to discern his position. From our previous discussions we can infer that a pious belief in these tenets can be labeled ‘wise’ since these dogmas serve to strengthen in people the desire to love one’s neighbor. Spinoza provides an instrumental justification for not dismissing revealed religion – even though it is grounded in a epistemic false notion of God – as ignorance tout court. Or to put this same claim differently: even though the imaginative idea of God as lawgiver is false, its inadequacy is irrelevant to the positive moral effect it generates.<sup>131</sup>

It is important to note that Spinoza leaves open the possibility for other historical

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<sup>131</sup> Harris, ‘Is There an Esoteric Doctrine in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*?’ 140. See also James: “A community whose way of life is grounded on imagining can generate standards of truth and falsity that, although inadequate, are sufficient for particular end, and can use these standards to build up bodies of morally certain knowledge of the first kind”(‘Creating Rational Understanding: Spinoza as a Social Epistemologist’, 185).

narratives to also embody the kind of doctrinal wisdom he attributes primarily to the revised version of revealed religion presented in the TTP. As we have seen, Spinoza reminds Burg that the Turks and the other ‘Gentiles’, provided they worship God by the exercise of justice and loving-kindness, also possess the Spirit of Christ (Ep. 43, 881). This again suggests that numerous other narratives potentially incorporate ‘knowledge of good and evil’ capable of teaching men justice and loving-kindness. Unfortunately, there is not enough textual evidence in the TTP to further develop this line of thought. Spinoza, however, does introduce a distinction between scriptural and secular narratives and their respective success in bringing about a desire for justice and loving-kindness. He writes:

the narratives contained in the Old and New Testaments are better than the other, secular narratives, and among the [scriptural narratives], some are better than others, in proportion as the opinions which follow from them are salutary. Hence if someone has read the narratives of Holy Scripture, and has had faith in them in every respect, and has nevertheless not attended to the lesson Scripture intends to teach with those stories, nor improved his life, it is just the same as if he had read the Koran, or the dramas of the Poets, or even the ordinary Chronicles, with the same attention as the common people usually give to these things. (TTP 5.46; GIII 79)

Although this fascinating passage allows for a more extensive exegesis, three main ideas come forward. First, Spinoza measures the success of historical narratives in terms of the salutary opinions that follow from them. Only when narratives are capable of bringing about substantial behavioral changes, i.e. successfully teach justice and loving-kindness - can they be said to be good pedagogical instruments.<sup>132</sup> Second, both secular and non-secular narratives can fulfill this pedagogical function. For Spinoza, the manifestation of ‘Christ within’ is not strictly dependent on the societal presence of the Bible; other narratives have the ability to also generate in people a desire for justice and loving-kindness. Third, for Spinoza, the Old and New Testaments (and

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<sup>132</sup> Earlier, Spinoza stipulates that “faith in historical narratives, whatever in the end those narratives may be ... does not have any utility except in relation to teaching. It is only in this respect that some narratives can be better than others” (TTP 5.45; GIII 79).

arguably the Koran) still prove to be most successful in effectuating behavioral changes for the good.

Spinoza does not provide an explicit reason for this last claim. However, our previous discussions all tend to this point: Scripture provides men with the anthropomorphic image of God the lawgiver; an exemplar particularly capable of effectuating in men behavioral changes. While there are many passion-based exemplars, for Spinoza, the image of God the lawgiver stands out. Indeed, we can surmise that it is exactly because of its reliance on men's most profound existential hopes and fears that it is so emotionally compelling. After all, Spinoza in the *Ethics* clearly suggests that only very few – i.e. the philosophically gifted – are capable of overcoming fear of death (see EIVp67). Scripture, however, speaks to those who are unable to understand God intellectually; men and woman who are led primarily by unstable hopes and fears.<sup>133</sup> The Bible addresses exactly those particularly sensitive to the imaginations of a personal God allotting rewards and punishments. Both the natural disposition of those to whom Scripture speaks, and the motivational efficacy the anthropomorphic image of God has in bringing about obedience contribute to the uniqueness of the Bible as pedagogical instrument.

The redefined version of revealed religion presented in the TTP addresses the multitude's passions in order to effectuate way of livings more beneficial to society. By relying on the multitude's hopes and fears, the biblical image of God the lawgiver commands men to defend justice, aid the poor, kill no one, and so on. However, the fact that revealed religion is driven particularly by the use of irrational passions simultaneously makes it vulnerable to corruption and abuse.<sup>134</sup> Spinoza emphasizes that “men usually err most regarding religion, and are apt to compete greatly in inventing many things according to the differences in their mentality” (TTP 16.62, GIII 199). Even a redefined version of revealed religion that limits the propositional knowledge associated with obedience will not prevent men from interpreting religious duty in a

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<sup>133</sup> For those who have the most powerful imaginations are less able to grasp things by pure intellect” (TTP 2.1; GIII 29).

<sup>134</sup> E.g. James, “Narratives as the means to freedom”, 256-60 and ‘Democracy and the good life’, 131.

widely disparate manner. Consequently, Spinoza argues that the common people need to be instructed by Pastors *or* ministers of the Church – appointed by the state – in those biblical “narratives which are most able to move their hearts to obedience and devotion” (TTP 5.44, GIII 79).<sup>135</sup> However, even in the ideal situation where men’s minds are moved to devotion towards God, the danger of religious decline lurks. Especially significant is Spinoza’s claim that devotion often brings people to a more fervent belief in miracles (see TTP 6.3; GIII 81), the epitome of superstitious ignorance (see Ep. 73). This fine line between faithful obedience and superstitious naiveté is a continuous thread that runs through the TTP. Spinoza’s concept of the spirit of Christ (here understood as acting justly through earnest, Christian obedience) thus captures only one dimension of revealed religion and the impact it has on political life.

#### 4.5 BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL: SPINOZA ON AMOR DEI INTELLECTUALIS

This final section argues that Spinoza’s concept of the spirit of Christ qualifies as a strictly political or ‘earthly’ category. That is, it is identified mainly with a desire for just and charitable behavior manifested in so-called ‘present life’, but does not by itself presuppose ‘eternity of mind’ (see EVp20s). I show that for Spinoza, only the attainment of ‘intellectual love of God’ truly makes people eternal. This final stage of the Spinozistic ethical ascent, however, is (1) characterized mainly as an intellectual or theoretical – rather than socio-political – activity directed towards the cultivation of *self-knowledge* and (2) entails a complete dismissal of evaluative language – viz. of notions of good and evil and the various exemplars of human life that correspond to it. What ties together the ethical endeavors of all those devoting themselves to justice and loving-kindness – allowing Spinoza to subsume them under one comprehensive category, viz. ‘the spirit of Christ’ – is not, as we have seen, the content of their knowledge, but a

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<sup>135</sup> Justin Steinberg excellently confronted the issue of the state’s capacity to promote civil liberty through a reordering of the affects. In his discussion of the various institutional features states have at their disposal to promote social agreement and *securitas*, he also covers the importance of a ‘sanitized’ civic religion (see his ‘Spinoza on Civil Liberation’, 56-57).

mutual reliance on action-guiding exemplars and, importantly, a shared commitment in overcoming the various stumbling-blocks that daily obstruct its realization. For philosophers and non-philosophers alike, the manifestation of Christ within requires constant meditation and a most steadfast mind and purpose.

It will be useful to briefly summarize our results up to this point. I have argued that Spinoza identifies the ‘spirit of Christ’ with, foremost, a desire for just and charitable behavior; an inclination towards brotherly love found in men of all religious and non-religious denominations. The spirit of Christ manifests itself in: (a) those who act justly out of intellectual enlightenment, (b) those who through faith – i.e. through a genuine belief in the dogmas of faith in the case of Judaism and Christianity – are inspired towards justice and charity, and (c) those ‘Turks and other Gentiles’ who are moved by their books to loving-kindness. I have argued that Spinoza’s divergent use of this concept can be explained in reference to the diversity of ‘knowledges of good and evil’ capable of inciting in men this desire for justice and charity. For Spinoza, both ‘*true* knowledge of good and evil’ (manifested by the striving towards the ideal of the free man) and ‘*purported* knowledge of good and evil’ (manifested in case of Judeo-Christian religion by the striving towards the ideal of God as lawgiver) have the capacity of leading people towards the spiritual Christ. I have argued that Spinoza leaves open the possibility for other exemplars to fulfill a similar function.

In a 2004 article, Herman De Dijn puts forward the thesis (one he himself admits to be controversial) that Spinoza’s depiction in *Ethics* IV of the rational man and the notion of the exemplar of the free man associated with it express a radically different ethical perspective than the one found in book V. He writes:

That these two parts (Book IV and V) are really different perspectives, is indicated in several ways. Not only by the two very different titles, but also by strong differences in content: talk of freedom as an ideal versus talk of freedom as a reality; talk of dictamina or praecepta rationis versus talk of remedia through knowledge of the third kind of one’s



emotions. ... One is the perspective of the rational man who (as IV Preface indicates) cannot help forming the notions of what is really good/bad (useful/obnoxious) and the notion of the exemplar of the free man. The desires of the rational man related to these notions and to this ideal can, however, be easily overruled. This is why the whole of Book IV really deals with human servitude or human weakness. The other perspective is that of another sort of ethical life, beyond good and bad, where we intuitively understand our emotions and thereby and therein are really strong and free. ('Ethics IV: the ladder, not the top', 4)<sup>136</sup>

De Dijn goes on to argue that the ethical life dominated by the striving towards the exemplar of the free man described in Part IV is only provisional: it "is not the only sort of life the philosopher is capable of. That there is another possibility is demonstrated on the basis of 'the Mind's knowledge alone'" (Ibid., 5). Importantly, the perspective provided by *Ethics* V – i.e. the five 'remedies' reformulated by Spinoza in EVp20s and the propositions underlying Spinoza's discussion of 'eternity of mind' (EVp21 and following) – no longer is one of striving towards an ideal. On the contrary, it is characterized by understanding alone: it consists in reaching "another level, a level of free activity in which all longing is forgotten" (Ibid., 9).<sup>137</sup>

De Dijn, it should be noted, is not alone in taking this position.<sup>138</sup> However, what makes his particular treatment of this topic especially controversial is the derived conclusion that the

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<sup>136</sup> A similar distinction is found in Rutherford: "on the one hand, Spinoza argues that by living according to the dictates of reason, we contribute to the preservation of our bodily existence, we enjoy a more pleasant and balanced psychological life, and we are apt to enter into cooperative social relations with our neighbors ... Spinoza's *Ethics* also includes the description of a higher form of existence: 'the rational life', or 'the life of the mind', which is defined by understanding" ('Spinoza and the Dictates of Reason', 488).

<sup>137</sup> Earlier in the paper he formulates this idea as follows: "the best therapy is not the one in which one tries to apply, "externally as it were" certain truths about good and bad to our life. This application may have certain good effects, particularly when we enliven these truths through imagination and memory (EVp10s). But it will not have the effects which Spinoza describes as real remedies (EVp20s) the best therapy is the one in which one 'forgets' about good and bad precepts, transcends the attempt to implement them, and simply acts in a certain way vis-à-vis one's passions, namely in the way as happens in our intuitive knowledge of our concrete emotions ('Ethics IV: the ladder, not the top', 5).

<sup>138</sup> While discussing Spinoza's exemplar of the free man, Rosenthal writes that "the highest good would be achieved when there is not any need for a model because we have acquired a precise understanding of our essential nature" ('Politics and Ethics in Spinoza: The Problem of Normativity', 90). Similarly, Melamed remarks that "when things are considered from an objective perspective – ... (i.e. the perspective of God, and of men, had they been born free [E4p68] and had adequate knowledge [E4p64] – good or evil are just meaningless" ('Spinoza's Metaphysics of Substance: The Substance-Mode Relation as a Relation of Inherence and Predication', 52, n. 108).

knowledge and desires of the rational man described in Book IV ultimately present themselves, as he puts it:

as a strange sort of science, a science of *entia rationes*, ‘science of good and bad’, the possession of which leads to a peculiar form of human weakness; not the weakness of the man steeped in ordinary anthropocentric illusions, but the weakness which still characterizes the desire of the rational man as geared towards the ideal human exemplar. (‘Ethics IV: the ladder, not the top’, 5)

De Dijn’s interpretation is especially relevant to the present discussion. He points out that ethical perspective characterized by the striving towards the ideal of the free man is closely tied to Spinoza’s discussion of the limits of reason. Book IV, entitled ‘Of Human Bondage, *or* the Powers of the Affects” is a reminder of our existence as imperfectly rational beings, of the impossibility of ever achieving full independence of external influences and the passions arising from them. Real life, De Dijn remarks, “also for the rational man is a life of struggle, of confrontation, with victories and defeats, a struggle in which personal strength and fortune (EIVp10s) play the central roles” (Ibid., 7; see also De Dijn, ‘Ethics as Medicine for the Mind (5 P1-20)’, 266).

Seen from this perspective, it makes a lot of sense for Spinoza to also incorporate in *Ethics* III & IV a discussion of other exemplars men usually set before themselves and their varying success in overcoming obstacles encountered in this life. What binds together the rational man striving towards the ideal of the free man and, for instance, the man of faith striving towards the ideal of a just and loving God, is a life in which passions and vagaries of fortune still very much dominate course of action. Spinoza, after all, is clear that even those desires arising from ‘true knowledge of good and evil’ often lack sufficient affective power to overcome or restrain other passions (EIVp16 & 17); a line of thought that manifestly extends itself to those desires arising from ‘purported knowledge of good and evil.’ The point I want to convey here is that it is understandable for Spinoza to tie together the ethical endeavors of all those who devote

themselves to justice and loving-kindness given the shared context wherein they operate (hence subsuming them under one comprehensive category, ‘the spirit of Christ’). The achievement of this goal for each category of persons will be a matter of dedication (‘strength of character’ (*fortitudo*) in the terminology of the *Ethics* or ‘constancy of heart’ in the language of the TTP) and continued commitment in overcoming the various stumbling blocks that might obstruct its realization.

This brings me to my final point. On De Dijn’s reading, Book IV and V of the *Ethics* each correspond to a different stage in the Spinozistic ascent towards ultimate freedom. Whereas Part IV describes a manner of living still dominated by a desire to implement *praecepta, dictamina, regulae* (EIVp18s) and emulate *exemplars*, Part V discusses a state of actual freedom achieved through knowledge of the third kind. Now, Spinoza’s discussion of intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*) with the accompanying ‘greatest satisfaction of mind’ (*summa acquiescentia*) and ‘intellectual love of God’ (*amor dei intellectualis*) has been the subject of much scholarly debate. What matters here, and this is uncontroversial, is that intuitive knowledge – and the intellectual love of God it gives rise to – consists (1) in knowledge of individual (actual) essences *sub specie aeternitatis* and (2) is a theoretical or intellectual endeavor that is mainly self-reflexive.

Now, to apprehend the (actual) essence of something *sub specie aeternitatis* is to capture the way in which that thing is a particular expression of God’s infinite essence. Instead of conceiving things “in relation to a certain time and place” (EVp29s), we conceive them as they are contained or conceived in God’s own essence “as real beings” (EVp30d). Or to phrase this somewhat differently: intuitive knowledge allows us to apprehend the relation of God’s essence to the essences of individual things (e.g. Soyarslan, ‘From Ordinary Life to Blessedness: The Power of Intuitive Knowledge in Spinoza’s Ethics’, 249). What we want to take away here is that intuitive knowledge forces one to transcend or leave behind the perspective provided by what Spinoza calls ‘the common order of nature.’ Indeed, the intellectual love of God (man’s *summum bonum*) discussed in the final propositions of the *Ethics* deals specifically with ‘the eternity of the mind.’

Furthermore, this intellectual love of God, as De Dijn points out, is not included among the remedies provided by Spinoza for achieving actual freedom in time. He writes that: “it looks as if the love of God, though not unimportant from the ethical point of view, nevertheless is not so much a remedy against the passions, as an experience having a significance going beyond the ethical perspective altogether” (*Ethics* IV: the ladder, not the top’, 11).

Spinoza tells us that the third kind of knowledge culminates in a cognition where man is “conscious of himself, and of God, and of things” by a “certain eternal necessity” (EVp42s). Let it suffice here to state that intuitive knowledge for Spinoza always is accompanied by an improved self-consciousness or self-understanding (e.g. Cook, ‘Self-knowledge as Self-Preservation?’; Schliesser, ‘Angels and Philosophers’; Soyarslan, ‘From Ordinary Life to Blessedness’). The intellectual love of God, the culmination of our contemplative activities, has a personal rather than socio-political connotation.

To conclude. This chapter has argued that the identification of the ‘spirit of Christ’ with, foremost, a desire for just and charitable behavior allows us to make full sense of Spinoza’s divergent use of this concept. Spinoza’s claim that apart from the Bible other narratives (and the exemplars they contain) also potentially qualify as pedagogical tools that lead people towards the ‘spiritual Christ’ demands an approach that takes into account the full range of knowledges capable of leading people to justice and charity. Furthermore, while the infinite intellect – i.e. the aggregate of *adequate* knowledge of nature – for some may provide the motivational basis for acting accordingly, the ‘spirit of Christ’ should not on that account be associated with the attainment of intellectual love of God. The realization of *ultimate* Spinozistic freedom extends beyond the sphere of everyday socio-political life, beyond good and evil. Although the attainment of intellectual love of God will not prevent the philosopher from devoting herself to justice and charity,<sup>139</sup> the manifestation of the spiritual Christ always presupposes a climbing down of the

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<sup>139</sup> Spinoza’s ethical thought seems to contain an ineradicable tension. On the one hand, Spinoza maintains that a life of pure understanding constitutes man’s supreme good. Put differently, the “life of the mind” put forward in *Ethics* V constitutes a way of living where understanding alone (viz. the

proverbial ladder. For Spinoza, the kingdom of the ‘spirit of Christ’ is one of this earth. Spinoza, moreover, holds no illusions that in order for us to approach genuine divinity or, as Schliesser puts it, feel ‘angelic’ (‘Angels and Philosophers’, 516) only philosophy will do.

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entailment of adequate ideas by other adequate ideas) is man’s greatest perfection. Such an individual, as Garber puts it, “would seem to be so totally absorbed in his contemplation of God and the world *sub specie aeternitatis* that there would be no room for relations with other finite creatures” (‘Dr. Fishelson’s Dilemma’, 184). On the other hand, Spinoza systematically links rationality with sociability: “men who are governed by reason ... want nothing for themselves which they do not desire for other men. Hence, they act just, honest, and honorable” (EIVp18s). I agree with Garber that this tension, to a large extent, dissolves when we recognize the metaphysical impossibility of a perfectly rational or completely detached individual. As finite beings, we can never be completely causally self-contained. Reason itself teaches us that perfect freedom is impossible (EIVp4). And since we always need the help of others to sustain our life, reason also recognizes that we necessarily need the company of others and the manifold benefits provided by society. To phrase this somewhat differently: whereas the need for society is an evitable and enduring feature of human existence, genuine understanding or the viewing of things *sub specie aeternitatis*, paradoxically enough, is only a temporal state. Though we always seek greater and greater rationality, only God can be called absolutely free and continuously active.

## CHAPTER 5: SPINOZA ON 'CHRIST ACCORDING TO THE FLESH': JESUS AS PHILOSOPHER-PROPHET. PART ONE: THE POLITICS OF JESUS

This chapter argues that the biblical Christ as presented by Spinoza in the *Theological-Political Treatise* represents Spinoza's version of the philosopher-prophet. Scholarship routinely portrays Spinoza's Christ as a moral exemplar who, in virtue of his adequate understanding of God's revelations, is seen as representative of a religion of reason.<sup>140</sup> A consideration of Jesus' activities as presented by Spinoza, however, is incomplete if it does not attend to the important role played by imaginative parables and obscure language. In order to lead both philosophers and non-philosophers to the perfection and salvation available to them, Spinoza's Christ develops a two-fold method of teaching adjusted to the psychological and affective predispositions of his audience: when confronted with an ignorant and stubborn multitude he teaches his revelations obscurely through parables (TTP 4.32-3; GIII 64-5); yet speaking to those who are capable of knowing 'the mysteries of the heavens' he teaches in terms of eternal truths (TTP 4.34; GIII 65). The union of Christ the philosopher and Christ the prophet will reveal Jesus' motivation as portrayed by Spinoza: as a philosopher, he has access to knowledge of what is required for salvation and therefore, according to Spinoza's description of a true philosopher, desires the same goodness for other men; as a prophet, Christ realizes that salvation through reason alone was impossible for the passionate multitudes, and therefore, like the prophets before him, he relies on the image of God as lawgiver.

In the TTP, Christ is presented as the embodiment of a new theological era, characterized by a moral, non-political, prophecy. He was sent "not to preserve the state and to institute laws, but to teach the one universal law" (TTP 5.9; GIII 70-71), and therefore appears to stand on the outside of the political spectrum. However, despite the essential nonpolitical character of Christ's

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<sup>140</sup> E.g., Matheron, *Le Christ et le salut des Ignorants chez Spinoza*, 251; Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, 288, n. 27; Laux, *Imagination et Religion chez Spinoza*, 276; Rosenthal, 'Toleration and the Right to Resist in Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*: The Problem of Christ's Disciples', 111; Frankel, 'The Invention of Liberal Theology: Spinoza's Theological-Political Analysis of Moses and Jesus', 301; James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics*, 109; Juffermans, 'Christus', 178; Nadler, *A book forged in hell*, 174; Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza*, 266.

teaching, a consideration of his activities is incomplete if it does not attend to the pervasive political implications. Specifically, this chapter argues that Spinoza's depiction of Christ as philosopher-prophet is meant to highlight the profoundly instrumental nature of revealed religion as portrayed in the TTP (an argument developed further in the following chapters). Instead of presenting the non-philosophical multitude with eternal truths that would not be understood, Spinoza's Jesus chose an alternative method of teaching that would be successful in encouraging justice and loving-kindness. He distilled out of the teachings of his prophetic predecessors a number of key imaginative ideas particularly useful for leading people towards faith. That is, Spinoza's Christ, a moral teacher who transcends the vulgar conception of the deity, embraces the anthropomorphic image of God due to its motivational efficacy in bringing about obedience. The Christ of the TTP presents himself as a consequentialist who not only tailors his message to his specific audience but ultimately presents them philosophically contradictory teachings. For Spinoza's Jesus, the philosophical inadequacy of the anthropomorphic image of God is secondary to the positive moral effect it generates.

This chapter proceeds as follows. Section 1 offers an examination of key passages within the TTP that deal with Spinoza's portrayal of 'Christ according to the flesh' (*Christus secundum carnem*). I show that insofar as Christ is a philosopher, he was a theological innovator who freed his audience from bondage to the old mosaic law; teaching them to live well from freedom of mind and constancy of heart alone. Insofar as he is a prophet, Spinoza's Christ institutes the religious doctrine that benefited the masses the most. I argue that it is this holistic perspective of Christ – i.e. the union of these two roles – that uniquely qualifies him as Spinoza's version of the philosopher-prophet. Sections 2 and 3 provide a political assessment of Christ's *modus operandi* towards the multitude. I argue that Christ 'according to the flesh' presented a religious doctrine serviceable to general society by relying on three overall tactics that the 'Spinozian' statesman uses to reign in the hearts of his people. Throughout his activities Spinoza's Jesus exhibited an awareness that institutional power and authority are, above all, grounded in the people. By

presenting a religious teaching that (a) accommodates its message to the multitude's understanding, (b) relies on craft and rhetorical persuasion, and (c) uses the multitude's passionate nature to institute obedience, the biblical Jesus of the TTP displays traits Spinoza generally ascribes to the most savvy of statesmen. Additionally, I show that Spinoza safeguards Jesus' political integrity by emphasizing that the latter's religious doctrine unconditionally submits the multitude to the rule of law.

### 5.1 SPINOZA ON JESUS' DUAL METHOD OF TEACHING

This section offers an examination of key passages dealing with Spinoza's portrayal of 'Christ according to the flesh'. Its principal aim is to show that Spinoza's Christ reveals himself both as a philosopher and a prophetic teacher. A consideration of Jesus' activities as presented by Spinoza is incomplete if it does not attend to both dimensions of his assignment.

Spinoza's treatment of the figure of Christ undoubtedly is one of the most puzzling aspects of his work. Christ is mentioned intermittently but unsystematically in both the TTP and his correspondence, in different and various contexts; scattered and fragmentary comments which, as we shall see, often compromise the search for a fully fleshed-out Spinozist Christology. Let me begin with Spinoza's claims about Jesus that are more or less straightforward.

First, the biblical Jesus of the TTP is distinguished from other prophets by the scope of his perception and knowledge of God's revelations. Spinoza makes it perfectly clear that the majority of the biblical prophets "were not endowed with a more perfect mind, but rather with a power of imagining unusually vividly". Precisely because of their intellectual limitations – "for those who have the most powerful imaginations are less able to grasp things by pure intellect" (TTP 2.1; GIII 29) – they confusedly perceived God as a lawgiver or prince. This does not apply to the biblical Jesus of the TTP. Though God revealed himself to the other prophets 'indirectly' –



i.e. through words and/or images – Jesus received God’s revelations without the aid of the imagination (TTP 1.25; GIII 21). God revealed himself immediately to Christ’s mind, and for this reason “Christ perceived truly, *or* understood, the things revealed” (TTP 4.32; GIII 64). Contrary to the other prophets who inadequately perceived God’s decrees as precepts and things instituted, Jesus perceived them as eternal truths (TTP 4.29-30; GIII 63-64). Spinoza makes a distinction between Christ, who understands God through reason as a philosopher would, and the other prophets, like Moses, who understand God confusedly through the imagination.

Besides a difference in cognitive capacities there is another way in which the biblical Jesus of the TTP is distinguished from other prophets. While the prophets of the Old Testament only had the wellbeing of the Jewish nation in mind, Jesus’ teaching transcended all national boundaries (TTP 4.31; GIII 64). This, Spinoza tells us, explains why Jesus, “who taught only universal teachings” (TTP 5.8; GIII 70) needed to have a mind accommodated to reason, for “it was not enough for him to have a mind accommodated only to the opinions of the Jews; [he needed a mind accommodated] to the opinions and teachings universal to the human race, i.e., to common and true notions” (TTP 4.31; GIII 64). Spinoza’s Jesus spoke to the whole of humanity. His ties were not to a specific people or nation, nor did he have the ambition to usurp political power. All he cared for, Spinoza claims, was “teaching moral lessons, and distinguishing them from the laws of the Republic” (TTP 5.9; GIII 71).

Spinoza emphasizes the uniqueness of Christ’s teaching through a comparison with Moses. As already noted, Spinoza maintains that the prophets of the Old Testament relied for their revelations solely on their imagination. That is, they perceived God according to their specific bodily temperament and preconceived opinions (TTP 2.13; GIII 32; see e.g. Pines, ‘Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Maimonides, and Kant’, 11). This equally applies to Moses, whose prior experiences in life, Spinoza tells us, made him believe that he was given by God the authority to lead the community and take charge of the protection of its citizens (TTP 2.37; GIII 38). However, Spinoza’s Moses knew perfectly well that the gift of prophecy was not peculiar to

the Jews, but common to all nations (TTP 3.41; GIII 53). In spite of this, he still presented his God as the highest and most supreme God – “the God of Gods” – who made the Hebrew nation his chosen people (TTP 2.37-8; GIII 39). Moses, faced with the temperament and stubborn heart of his nation, realized that only by appealing to “the greatest miracles and the special external aid of God” would he succeed in establishing a secure nation (TTP 3.41; GIII 53). He made his people believe that God, through his revelations, gave him the means to create a unique societal order based solely on the needs of the Jewish people (see Rosenthal, ‘Why Spinoza Chose the Hebrews’, 233). Put differently, God’s revelations were interpreted and presented as laws serviceable for the preservation of the Jewish state. Moreover, in order to keep the people from violating these laws, thereby endangering the stability of the body politic, a system of punishment and reward was installed. According to Spinoza, Moses ultimately did not teach the Jewish people “anything other than a way of living - and that not as a Philosopher, so that they might eventually live well from freedom of mind, but as a Legislator, so that they were constrained to live well by the command of the Law” (TTP 2.46; GIII 41).

According to Spinoza, Jesus’ calling was of a an entirely different nature: Jesus “did not institute laws like a lawgiver; instead, like a teacher he taught lessons, because ... he did not want to correct external actions so much as the heart” (TTP 7.32; GIII 103).<sup>141</sup> Where Moses promised his people a corporeal reward for compliance to the instituted laws and ceremonies, Jesus promised mankind a spiritual reward for adhering to the universal divine law (TTP 5.8; GIII 70). In short, Spinoza’s Jesus was a theological innovator. He taught his adherents to comply with divine law on the basis of their own decision, and not because they are summoned to do so by others. Or to put this claim differently: Christ urges his disciples to devote themselves “to loving God, not from fear of punishment, nor from love for another thing, such as pleasure or reputation, etc., but only because he knows God, or because he knows that the knowledge and love of God is the highest good” (TTP 4.14; GIII 60). The moral truth of the divine law is

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<sup>141</sup> Christ “was sent, not to preserve the state and to institute laws, but to teach the one universal law” (TTP 5.9; GIII 70-1).

perceived inwardly as a natural effect of knowing God. Spinoza phrases this as follows: “God sent to all nations his Christ, who would free all equally from bondage to the law, so that they would no longer act well because of the Law's commandment, but because of a constant decision of the heart” (TTP 3.45; GIII 54).

In sum, Spinoza's Jesus is distinguished from the other prophets in light of (1) his superior cognitive abilities, (2) the universality of his teaching, and (3) the innovativeness of his tutorage. This final point requires some caution. The so-called natural divine law – characterized by the precept “to know God and to love him from freedom” (TTP 4.21; GIII 62) – is advocated already in the Hebrew Bible (specifically in the teachings of Isaiah [see TTP 5.4; GIII 690] and Solomon's Proverbs [see e.g. TTP 4.41-46; GIII 66-8]). According to Spinoza's interpretation, Isaiah, Salomon, and Jesus all are read as identifying the love of God with a virtuous disposition in the man who rightly knows God.<sup>142</sup>

Spinoza nevertheless goes to great lengths to maintain and emphasize Jesus' uniqueness. Consider the following passage from TTP Chapter One:

for a man to perceive by the mind alone things which aren't contained in the first foundations of our knowledge, and can't be deduced from them, his mind would necessarily have to be more excellent than, and far superior to, the human mind. So I do not believe that anyone else has reached such perfection, surpassing all others, except Christ, to whom the decisions of God, which lead men to salvation, were revealed immediately - without words or visions. (TTP 1.22-3; GIII 20-1)

For Spinoza, the biblical Jesus was unique because he achieved an unprecedented intellectual perfection: Christ alone was capable of perceiving things which exceed the boundaries of normal human knowledge. This particular passage seems to suggest that Jesus' mind, the mind of the historical figure, also contained superhuman knowledge. However, readers familiar with

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<sup>142</sup> According to Spinoza, Paul later too advocated a proper understanding of the divine law. See TTP 4.8-9; GIII 59.

Spinoza's metaphysics will immediately question the truth of this assertion, and we are right to give pause when confronting claims of the 'supernatural' in Spinoza. He proceeds as follows:

So God revealed himself to the Apostles through Christ's mind, as previously he had revealed himself to Moses by means of a heavenly voice. And therefore Christ's voice, like the one Moses heard, can be called the voice of God. And in this sense we can also say that God's Wisdom, that is, a Wisdom surpassing human wisdom, assumed a human nature in Christ, and that Christ was the way to salvation. But I must warn here that I am not speaking in any way about the things some of the Churches maintain about Christ. Not that I deny them. For I readily confess that I do not grasp them. What I have just affirmed I conclude from Scripture itself. Nowhere have I read that God appeared or spoke to Christ, but rather that God was revealed to the Apostles through Christ, that he is the way to salvation [John 14:6], and finally, that the old law was imparted by an Angel, but not by God immediately. So, if Moses spoke with God face to face, as a man usually does with a companion (i.e., by means of their two bodies), Christ, indeed, communicated with God mind to mind. We have asserted, then, that except for Christ no one has received God's revelations without the aid of the imagination, i.e., without the aid of words or images. So no one needed to have a more perfect mind in order to prophesy, but only a more vivid imagination. (TTP 1.24-5; GIII 21)

A number of observations are in order here. First, Spinoza in this passage does not go beyond saying that he does not understand the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. Letter 73 to Oldenburg, however, leaves less to the imagination: to say that God himself assumed a human nature is as absurd as saying that a circle has taken on the nature of a square (Ep. 73, 943). For Spinoza, Christ, like any other human being, was a finite mode of God. Indeed, Spinoza tells Oldenburg that he accepts "the passion, death and burial of Christ ... literally" (Ep. 78, 953).

Second, when Spinoza refers to Christ as the 'voice of God' this should be interpreted allegorically or spiritually. Christ can be called the way to salvation (*via salutis*) because it was through Christ's mediation that the Apostles received God's ordinances leading to salvation. Spinoza's correspondence with Oldenburg provides clarification. We already know that in

Spinoza's opinion Christ did not literally rise from the dead. Spinoza in turn puts forward an allegorical reading of Christ's resurrection. He writes:

Christ's resurrection from the dead was in fact of a spiritual kind and was revealed only to the faithful according to their understanding, indicating that Christ was endowed with eternity and rose from the dead (I here understand 'the dead' in the sense in which Christ said 'Let the dead bury their dead'), and also by his life and death he provided an example of surpassing holiness, and that he raises his disciples from the dead insofar as they follow the example of his own life and death (Ep 75, 946).

Spinoza tells Oldenburg that Christ's divinity above all relates to the eternity or universal validity of his moral teaching. As Verbeek eloquently puts it: "Christ did not rise *from* the dead (*resurrexit*); he stood up (*surrexit*) *among* the dead, 'dead' being those who, having no moral rule, lead a life of anxiety and war. Christ's role therefore was to give a moral exemplar, that is, to instantiate a rule of behaviour" (*Spinoza's Theologico-political Treatise: Exploring 'the Will of God'*, 85). Indeed, what makes Spinoza's Jesus 'the mouth of God' is not a miraculous gift, but his adequate understanding of the divine law and his exceptional ability of translating that insight into an exemplary moral lifestyle; a lifestyle particularly effective at encouraging others to live in a similar manner (see also Nadler, *A book forged in hell*, 174). At any rate, Spinoza's assertion that 'God's wisdom assumed a human nature in Christ' does not require an explanation grounded in a supernatural reality.

Now (third), Spinoza's claim that Christ 'communicated with God mind to mind' already suggests as much. While there remains a vast difference between perceiving God's revelations through the imagination (applicable to Moses and the majority of prophets) and perceiving God's ordinances immediately through the mind alone (applicable to Christ), the latter form of cognition does not presuppose something non-natural or beyond the natural. On the contrary, Spinoza explicitly indicates that God always speaks 'mind to mind' to all of us, for he "communicates his essence to our minds without using any corporeal means" (ITP 1.22; GIII

21). There is, in other words, nothing out of the ordinary about Christ's conversation with God (see e.g. Mason, *The God of Spinoza*, 217; Melamed, "Christus secundum spiritum': Spinoza, Jesus and the infinite intellect', 145).

One pertinent question remains. Given that Spinoza provides clear-cut arguments against a literal understanding of the incarnation (rejecting the special divinity commonly attributed to the biblical Jesus in orthodox Christianity), and ultimately presents Jesus as a finite mode of God, why did he nonetheless emphasize that Christ achieved an intellectual perfection far superior to the human mind? Spinoza repeatedly questions the idea of a supernatural light (see e.g. TTP 7.71; GIII 112, TTP 7.74; GIII 113 and TTP 13.5; GIII 167), so we can assume he has something different in mind. A closer look at the relevant passage provides clarification. He tells us that Christ surpassed all others because he alone adequately perceived the conditions or "decisions of God, which lead men to salvation" (TTP 1.23; GIII 21). Spinoza is referring to what he calls the foundation of theology, the idea that men are saved by obedience alone, i.e. by works of justice and loving-kindness. In chapter 15 of the TTP, Spinoza explains that this fundamental tenet of theology cannot be tracked down by the natural light: "the power of reason does not go so far as to enable it to determine that men can be blessed by obedience alone, without understanding things" (TTP 15.22; GIII 184).<sup>143</sup> According to Spinoza, it was Christ alone who succeeded in accessing knowledge of what is required for salvation. What ordinary men, including Spinoza, can accept with only moral certainty, Spinoza's Jesus perceived with absolute certainty.

Spinoza's assertion is remarkable to say the least.<sup>144</sup> For one thing, Spinoza claims to

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<sup>143</sup> Spinoza is fully aware of the difficulties that may follow from this remarkable statement: "we cannot demonstrate by reason whether the foundation of Theology – that men are saved only by obedience – is true or false. So someone may raise against us the objection: why then do we believe it? If we embrace it without reason, like blind men, then we too act foolishly and without judgment. On the other hand, if we want to maintain that we can demonstrate this foundation rationally, then Theology will be a part of Philosophy, and ought not to be separated from it. To this I reply that I maintain unconditionally that the natural light cannot track down this fundamental tenet of Theology – or at least that no one yet has demonstrated it" (TTP 15.26-27; GIII 185).

<sup>144</sup> Leo Strauss claims that Spinoza deliberately introduced various inconsistencies and contradictions in the TTP. He argues that the *Treatise* contains two opposing teachings: an exoteric one addressed to the inexperienced reader, and an esoteric one destined for the 'more prudent' and skilled philosophical reader.

derive this conclusion from Scripture: “What I have just affirmed I conclude from Scripture itself” (TTP 1.24; III/21). Some commentators wonder whether such induction is warranted by the books of the New Testament (see e.g. Pines, *Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Maimonides, and Kant’, 20-21). The difficulty is heightened by the fact that he does not provide any further explanation regarding the type of knowing available to Christ. A majority of scholars suggest that Spinoza’s Jesus must have possessed intuitive knowledge (see e.g. Matheron, *Le Christ et le salut des Ignorants chez Spinoza*, 251 & 257; Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, 288, n. 27; Nadler, *A book forged in hell*, 174; James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics*, 109). Spinoza indicates that Christ had an adequate understanding of the foundation of theology, albeit an understanding that was not derived or deduced from other principles.<sup>145</sup> In other words, Christ’s knowledge of the foundation of theology did not depend on experience or reasoning, which, in light of Spinoza’s threefold division of kinds of cognition, seems to suggest that Spinoza’s Jesus must have relied on intuition.

This view, however appealing it may seem, still faces some serious challenges. One obvious worry about this account is that given Spinoza’s highly enigmatical account of the third kind of cognition presented in the *Ethics*, such characterizations ultimately clarify very little. As Mason indicates, “to say that Jesus employed it is almost to explain the obscure by means of the still more obscure. At least it may be to paper over a problem by covering it with terminology” (*The God of Spinoza*, 217-8). It should not surprise that commentators have presented contradictory readings of what it means for Spinoza’s Christ to have possessed intuitive knowledge. Some argue that Christ’s intuitive perception did not prevent him from expounding

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According to Strauss, Spinoza uses the apparent exoteric teaching (one couched in terms agreeable to the language of scripture) to hide the true message of his work (viz. a full-blown atheistic, anti-religious discourse). Spinoza’s treatment of Christ, in Strauss’ opinion, nicely exemplifies this insincere rhetorical strategy. See, for instance, his ‘How to Study Spinoza’s ‘Theologico-Political Treatise’, 99-101. See also Yovel, *The Marrano of Reason*, 150-2. For a critical assessments of Strauss’s position (and of esotericism in Spinoza more generally), see Harris, ‘Is There an Esoteric Doctrine in the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus?’.

<sup>145</sup> See e.g. Matheron: “‘il n’a pas déduit de l’idée de Dieu ce qu’il enseigne” (*Le Christ et le salut des Ignorants chez Spinoza*, 147).

the philosophical rationale underlying his revelations. James, for instance, writes that “from the fact that someone is equipped with an intuitive grasp of the conclusions at which a philosophical reasoner can arrive by a more laborious route, it does not follow that they are incapable of spelling out the relationship they perceive” (*Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics*, 109). Others have questioned such characterizations. Donagan writes that “since he [Spinoza’s Jesus] lacks cognition of the principles by which his prophetic cognition can be shown to be adequate, he cannot demonstrate its adequacy, as a philosopher must, from ‘the first foundations of our cognition’” (‘Spinoza’s theology’, 373). Spinoza’s Christ for this exact reason should not be mistaken for a truly accomplished philosopher.<sup>146</sup> We will return to this point shortly. What matters here is that regardless of how one interprets Christ’s adequate, arguably intuitive, perception of the foundation of theology, Spinoza’s commitment to the humanness of the biblical Jesus remains undisputed.

We are now able to put some of the pieces together. A brief look at the relevant passages shows that Spinoza ultimately presents Christ as a man with normal ‘human’ knowledge. Moreover, he is as a man with passions – he suffered on the cross (see Ep. 78, 953 and TTP 12.24; GIII 163) – and inadequate ideas; no human being can be purely rational (see especially EIVp68 and its scholium). But Jesus of course was no ordinary man. Not only did he excel in piety and constancy of heart, he alone adequately perceived the foundation of theology.

This brings me to my final point. The biblical Christ was also a prophet. Although this seems obvious, some caution should be taken given Spinoza’s hesitation in the TTP to state this in plain terms. Spinoza’s correspondence with Jacob Ostens (February 1671) provides confirmation. While reflecting on the nature of Mahomet’s teaching, Spinoza comments on the difference between a true prophet and an impostor. He writes:

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<sup>146</sup> “Spinoza Jesus is a prophet in the colloquial sense, not a philosopher” (Donagan, ‘Spinoza’s theology’, 373). A similar reading is found in Polka: “the fact that Christ perceived things that are not contained in the primary foundations of human knowledge and cannot be deduced from them aligns him with the prophets and not with everyman (as philosopher)” (*Between Philosophy and Religion*, 46).



I move on to his [Van Velthuysen's] conclusion where he says that 'I have left myself with no argument to prove that Mahomet was not a true prophet', which he tries to prove from the views I have expressed. Yet from these it clearly follows that Mahomet was an impostor, since he completely abolishes the freedom which is granted by that universal religion revealed by the natural and prophetic light, and which I have shown ought to be fully granted. And even if this were not so, am I bound, pray, to show that some prophet is false? On the contrary, the prophets were bound to show that they were true prophets. And if he replies that Mahomet, too, taught the divine law and gave sure signs of his mission as did the other prophets, there is certainly no reason for him to deny that Mahomet was a true prophet. (Ep. 43, 881)

According to Spinoza, the true prophet teaches the *divine law* and confirms his prophecy with clear signs. Both elements function as sufficient conditions. Someone presenting a teaching that fully abolishes freedom of thinking should be considered nothing more than a fraud. A religious doctrine that completely prevents the free use of reason can never be in accordance with the divine law, be it revealed by the natural or the prophetic light.<sup>147</sup>

In Chapter 4 of the TTP, Spinoza introduces the distinction between *human law* and *divine law*. Where the former relates to the various decrees instituted by a commonwealth for the purpose of preserving the state and protecting its citizens, the latter relates to the supreme 'spiritual' good of all men, i.e. the true knowledge and love of God (TTP 4.9; GIII 59). As we have seen, however, the TTP makes a further distinction between the *natural* divine law and *revealed* divine law. Whereas the former corresponds to a love of God grounded in an adequate (philosophical) conception of the divine, the latter relates to a love of God grounded in an anthropomorphic (imaginative) conception of God as enacted by the teachings of the prophets. For Spinoza, religion is either "revealed by the natural light or by the Prophetic light" (TTP 19.17; GIII 231). Spinoza, unfortunately, is not always very explicit in his usage of the term divine law. The context, however, makes it clear that Spinoza in the letter to Ostens primarily has the

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<sup>147</sup> Ep. 43, 881. It should be noted that a prophet does not have to teach freedom of thought as a positive doctrine.

*revealed* divine law in mind. In short, the true prophet teaches the revealed divine law – and this in a manner that does not forbid freedom of thinking – and confirms his revelations with signs. The biblical Jesus of the TTP satisfies both conditions.

First, despite the clear epistemological difference between Jesus and the other prophets, the former did not present his religious doctrine merely in the form of eternal truths. Spinoza's account of Christ as theological innovator is coupled with passages that indicate that he also made use of the imaginative resources found in the teachings of his predecessors. Consider the following passage:

[Christ] perceived the things revealed truly and adequately. If he ever prescribed them as laws, he did this because of the people's ignorance and stubbornness. So in this respect he acted in the role of God, because he accommodated himself to the mentality of the people. That's why, although he spoke somewhat more clearly than the other Prophets, he still taught these revelations obscurely, and quite frequently through parables, especially when he was speaking to those to whom it was not yet given to understand the kingdom of heaven (see Matthew 13:10 etc). But doubtless when he was speaking to those to whom it was given to know the mysteries of the heavens, he taught things as eternal truths and did not prescribe them as laws. (TTP 4.32-4; GIII 65)

Spinoza's portrayal of Christ's activities presents Jesus' awareness that the ideal religion – characterized by the precept to know and love God from true freedom and with a whole and constant heart – was unattainable for the majority of people. Spinoza's Jesus, for this reason, still presents the majority of his adherents with the anthropomorphic image of God as lawgiver. Indeed, Spinoza emphasizes that "Christ did not at all repeal the law of Moses" (TTP 5.9; III/71; see also TTP 7.31; III/103). What matters for now is that Christ, in his teachings to the masses, presented people with the seven 'simple' tenets of faith enumerated by Spinoza in TTP Chapter 14 (Matheron, *Le Christ et le salut des Ignorants chez Spinoza*, 96). These tenets, Spinoza indicates, are

subject to free interpretation.<sup>148</sup> Spinoza's Jesus, in other words, did not present a religious doctrine that prevents freedom of thinking.

Second, regardless of the fact that Christ's main intention was to teach moral lessons, the use of signs and miracles still forms an integral part of his teaching. Indeed, Spinoza includes Christ's healing of the blind man disclosed in the Gospel of John among the miracles related in Scripture (TTP 6.47; GIII 90). Spinoza, moreover, tells us that Christ gave his Apostles the power and authority to perform miracles (TTP 19.31-33; GIII 233-4). In sum, given that the TTP shows that Christ (a) taught the revealed divine law, (b) confirmed his revelations with signs, and (c) provided a doctrine that does not forbid freedom of thinking, we can be certain that Jesus, according to Spinoza's own standards, was a true prophet.

Let me summarize. In this section we have seen that Spinoza offers a remarkably positive portrayal of Christ. Spinoza's Jesus not only transcended the vulgar conception of the deity associated with the majority of prophets, he also acquired an adequate conception of the foundation of theology, an achievement unprecedented in history. Spinoza's view of Jesus differs from that of the traditional Christian belief: the view that Jesus was the son of God, the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity, is rejected; it is logically impossible.<sup>149</sup> For Spinoza, Jesus' uniqueness or 'divinity' refers to his adequate understanding of the divine law and his exceptional ability of translating that insight into an exemplary moral lifestyle. However, Spinoza's portrayal of Christ as theological innovator captures only one dimension of his activities. Christ, a religious emancipator who was sent to free his audience from bondage to the old Mosaic law, deliberately chooses not to teach the multitude God's revelations in terms of eternal truths; instead he accommodates his message to the understanding of the masses.

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<sup>148</sup> E.g. TTP 14.32; GIII 178: "each person is bound to accommodate these doctrines of faith to his own power of understanding, and to interpret them for himself, as it seems to him easier for him to accept them without any hesitation".

<sup>149</sup> See Lasker, 'Reflections of the medieval Jewish-Christian debate in the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Epistles*', 63.

Specifically, Spinoza's Christ develops a two-fold method of teaching adjusted to the predispositions of his audience: when confronted with an ignorant and stubborn multitude he teaches his revelations obscurely through parables; yet speaking to those who are capable of knowing 'the mysteries of the heavens' he teaches in terms of eternal truths. I argue that it is this holistic perspective of Christ – i.e. his role as both philosophical instructor (who teaches the elect the natural divine law) and prophetic teacher (who teaches the masses the revealed divine law) – that uniquely qualifies him as Spinoza's version of the philosopher-prophet.

This characterization faces a number of challenges. Let me begin with perhaps the most forcible worry of all. A unified reading of Spinoza's Jesus that sees the latter's two-fold method of teaching as essential to Spinoza's characterization appears to endanger the apolitical nature of Christ's activities suggested in the TTP. After all, Christ's decision not to teach the multitude God's revelations in terms of eternal truths is more than just an application of the theological principle of accommodation: while parables and obscure language are devised for the multitude, the elect still receive true knowledge devoid of imaginative language. Christ is thus presented as a consequentialist who not only adapts his message to his hearers, but ultimately presents them with philosophically inconsistent teachings. In what follows, I argue that Spinoza provides sufficient textual evidence to support such a bold interpretation. To be clear, Spinoza's Jesus, unlike Moses, is no politician in the strictest sense: he is no founder of states, nor does he have the well-being of one particular nation in mind. This, however, does not distract from the fact that his activities towards the multitude are characterized by a significant level of political acuteness. In order for him to successfully promote the message of justice and loving-kindness, Spinoza's Jesus willingly and consciously sought recourse to imaginative language that would allow him to achieve this goal. While doing so, Spinoza's Jesus implements various strategies commonly associated with savvy Spinozistic statesmanship. The following two sections are meant to bring this neglected feature of Christ's activities as portrayed in the TTP to light.

## 5.2 THE PATH TO (STATE) OBEDIENCE

Before addressing the political dimension of Jesus' activities while propagating religion to the people, I examine four key traits that Spinoza attributes to the statesman. An investigation of the precise *modus operandi* of the Spinozian statesman will provide us with a better understanding of Jesus' politics of religion as portrayed in the TTP.

In his *Political Treatise*, Spinoza writes that the right of the supreme authorities is nothing more than simple natural right limited by the power of the people (e.g. TP 3.2, 690 and TP 2.17, 687). To maintain his authority the sovereign needs to take the necessary precautions to preserve and strengthen the loyalty of his subjects. Throughout Spinoza's political writings, we can discern four general strategies the statesman uses to reign in the hearts of his subjects.

First, he needs to accommodate state legislation to the common man's nature. No state will ever be able to control the minds of its people, nor their way of judging things (TTP 20.6; GIII 240). The wise politician focuses his attention on laws that guide the actions of men. Moreover, people only have the tendency to comply consistently with state legislation when they judge it to be in their own interest.<sup>150</sup> Laws, as a consequence, need to be shaped in such a manner that citizens believe that it is in their best interest not to violate them.<sup>151</sup> One way for the state to achieve this is by avoiding, as much as possible, excessive exercise of power (TP 3.9, 693). The ultimate end of the state, after all, "is not to act as a despot, to restrain men by fear, and to make them subject to someone else's control, but on the contrary to free each person from fear, so that he may live securely, as far as possible" (TTP 20.11; GIII 240-1). At all costs, the state needs to avoid a repressive judicial system that smothers all sense of individual

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<sup>150</sup> Spinoza writes that "human nature is so constituted that each pursues his personal advantage with the utmost keenness, regarding as most equitable those laws which he thinks are necessary for the preservation and increase of his own fortune and upholding another's cause only so far as he believes his own position to be strengthened thereby" (TP 7.4, 710).

<sup>151</sup> Spinoza claims that our task is "to so establish everything that everyone, no matter what his mentality, prefers the public right to private advantage" (TTP 17.16; GIII 203). To avoid civil disobedience the state will need to convince its subjects that only its sovereignty can sustainably provide peace and security. According to Balibar, the best regime is therefore one "which achieves the strongest correlation between the security of the individual and the stability of its institutions" (*Spinoza and Politics*, 68).

freedom.<sup>152</sup> Another way for the sovereign to prevent disobedience to state legislation is by instituting only those laws that people are capable of obeying. The state is always wise to limit the scope of its legislation, for “he who wants to set limits to everything by laws, will aggravate vices more than he will correct them” (TTP 20.24; GIII 243). A third tactic would be to institute laws that are suited to the specific historical traditions of the nation, “for a people accustomed to a different form of government will not be able to tear up the traditional foundations of their state, changing its entire structure, without great danger of overthrowing the entire state” (TP 7.26, 719). Ultimately, the state needs to construct a legislative system that accounts for the specific mentality of its people.<sup>153</sup>

The second strategy of a successful statesman is knowing that a reliance on craft is sometimes in the best interest of the state. The cunning politician knows that “men should be governed in such a way that they do not think of themselves as being governed but as living as they please and by their own free will” (TP 10.8, 750). To do this, a good statesman uses craft. One example is hiding certain things from the people. Moses, for instance, introduced religion into the body politic so that his people would do their duty not so much from fear as from devotion (TTP 5.29; GIII 75). He persuaded the people that he excelled in divine power, and in the name of God promised them many things.<sup>154</sup> As a result, the Hebrew people were stimulated to do spontaneously what they believed was their religious duty, though the law of Moses ultimately was concerned with nothing but the state (e.g. TTP 5.31; GIII 76 and TTP 5.9; GIII

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<sup>152</sup> Spinoza emphasizes that “laws must be so instituted in each state that men are checked not so much by fear as by the hope of some good they desire very much. For in this way everyone will do his duty eagerly” (TTP 5.24; GIII 74). Spinoza undoubtedly has Hobbesian politics in mind, which considered fear as the most powerful force in human life. According to Hobbes, fear functions both as the root of civil society - “the original of all great and lasting societies consisted not in the mutual good will men had towards each other, but in the mutual fear they had of each other” (*De Cive*, Ch. 1, 113) - and as the ultimate means of its preservation - “the passion to be reckoned upon is fear” (*Leviathan*, Ch. 14, 88).

<sup>153</sup> According to Susan James, effective legislation “is bound to be a matter of negotiation between sovereigns and their subjects, and will reflect a local consensus as to what is tolerable” (‘Law and sovereignty in Spinoza's politics’, 211). See also Steinberg, ‘Following a *Recta Ratio Vivendi*’, 184.

<sup>154</sup> On the art of persuasion, see also TTP 5.23; GIII 74. For an excellent treatment of Spinoza's overall use of rhetoric in the TTP, see Rosenthal, ‘Persuasive Passions: Rhetoric and the Interpretation of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*’.

1). By hiding certain things from his people, Moses was able to craftily steer the Hebrews in the direction that most benefited the Jewish state.<sup>155</sup>

The third strategy of a good statesman is maintaining and stimulating as much as possible those passions that allow subjects to be guided with ease. Men rarely live from the dictate of reason, and so the affects of, for example, humility, repentance, hope and fear, bring more advantage than disadvantage for the state, for if “men were all equally proud, ashamed of nothing, and afraid of nothing, how could they be united or restrained by any bonds?” (EIVp54s). Spinoza holds no illusions that even in the civil state subjects are inclined to execute the commonwealth's decrees, either through fear of its power or through love for the security and opportunities that entail political stability (see, for instance, Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 107). To maintain its authority, the state is bound to preserve the principal causes of fear and reverence (TP 4.4, 697). Although the ultimate goal of the commonwealth can never be to restrain men solely by fear (TTP 20.11; GIII 240) – a free multitude is always more responsive to hope (TP 5.6. See also TTP 4.6; GIII 59) – politicians nonetheless often need to resort to threats (EIVp37s2).<sup>156</sup> In order to impose discipline on the multitude, statesmen have to anticipate the common man's passions and use them in a way that brings the most benefit to the state.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> We can also think of Bacon's characterization of Mohammad in the *Essays*. The latter is identified as a lawgiver capable of procuring unity in religion through the perfection of boldness (see ‘Of Unity’, 346, ‘Of Boldness’, 362 and ‘Of Vicissitude of Things’, 452).

<sup>156</sup> Michael Rosenthal shows that “for Spinoza, religion, and particular one involving the idea of a transcendent God who guides the world providentially, is a natural and widespread means whereby sovereign authority is established and, in the eyes of less rational men, validated” (‘Miracles, wonder, and the state in Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*’, 235). Rosenthal argues that religion, when stripped of its metaphysical pretensions, is extremely useful for the state because of its power to evoke passions of awe and fear.

<sup>157</sup> In Spinoza's ideal Monarchy, the absolute power of the sovereign is checked by the presence of a supreme council. According to Spinoza, this council should always consist of (i) a large number of representatives and (ii) representatives of an older age. This is important because both requisites generate in people's minds the hope to one day become part of this council. Human ambition consequently ensures that people will defend the right and necessity of the council. In short, Spinoza uses natural ambition to ensure the democratic character of the monarchic state form (see TP, Ch. 7). Spinoza's reflections bear a striking resemblance with the later philosophy of his fellow-countryman Mandeville. According to the latter, clever politicians will always use and work on the passions and desires of the people transforming them into public benefits. See e.g. *Fable of the Bees*, Vol. 2, 232: “it is the work of ages to find out the true use of the passions, and to raise a politician, that can make every frailty of the members add strength to the whole Body, and by dexterous management turn *private Vices into publick Benefits*”. For Spinoza's

Fourth, a good statesman knows that he needs to eliminate or contain those forms of authority that are capable of dividing his sovereignty (e.g. TTP 17.107; GIII 219-20). Given the influence clergymen tend to have on the multitude, religious authority above all should be seen as a force to be reckoned with, “for everyone knows how highly the people value the right and authority regarding sacred matters, and how much everyone hangs on the utterances of the one who has it, so much so that we can rightly say that the person who has this authority has the most powerful control over their hearts”(TTP 19.40-1; GIII 235). In order for the state to avoid the multitude being swept away by the charisma and influence of religious authorities, statesmen should bring about that only public authority can function as the legitimate source of obligation.

These four elements can easily be considered as practical considerations every ‘Spinozian’ statesman should take into account in preserving and propagating the state. The same perspicacity in dealing with the multitude we also encounter in the biblical Christ as presented by Spinoza and the former’s method of propagating religion to the masses. In the TTP, Spinoza describes how Jesus presents the people a religious doctrine serviceable to general society. To achieve this, Spinoza’s Jesus develops a politics of religion whose foundations correspond to a large extent with those enumerated above. By presenting a religious doctrine that (a) accommodates its message to the multitude’s understanding, (b) relies on craft, i.e. hides certain things from the people for their own good, (c) uses the multitude's passionate nature to foster obedience, and (d) submits the multitude to the authority of the state, Jesus would act in a manner characteristic of true ‘Spinozian’ statesmen.

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treatment of ambition, see Rosenthal’s ‘Tolerance as a virtue in Spinoza’s Ethics’, 544-546 and ‘Spinoza’s Republican Argument for Toleration’, 321-3.



### 5.3 JESUS' PROPAGATION OF RELIGION

This section starts off with a discussion of the three central strategies used by the biblical Christ of the TTP to ensure that his doctrine was capable to reign in the hearts of the people (5.3.1). Subsequently, Jesus' awareness of the importance of state authority will be made explicit (5.3.2).

#### 5.3.1 JESUS AND THE PEOPLE

Given that men's judgments are intrinsically connected with their affective dispositions, society will necessarily consist of an amalgamation of opinions. While the goal of the state will be to achieve a certain degree of uniformity among people's actions, it will never succeed in eliminating variations in judgments and ideas. Therefore, all efforts to (directly) control people's thoughts will be ultimately in vain. This pragmatic attitude towards the affects and people's way of judging plays a crucial role in Spinoza's overall political philosophy. In order to conceive a theory of politics that could be effective, statesmen should always take into account the nature of men and organize the foundations of the state and its legislation around it.<sup>158</sup> We can surmise by Spinoza's description that Jesus was aware of this crucial insight. In order for the Christian spirit to capture the minds of the people, Jesus needed to rely on three fundamental political strategies. Let us have another look at the relevant passage from Chapter 4:

Christ, therefore, perceived the things revealed truly and adequately. If he ever prescribed them as laws, he did this because of the people's ignorance and stubbornness. So in this respect he acted in the role of God, because he accommodated himself to the mentality

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<sup>158</sup> The state requires leaders who are capable of combining intelligence and craft. As we have seen, statesmen will need to possess a specific set of skills allowing them to, for instance, channel and align the passions of the people in such a way that benefits the state the most (e.g. TP 10.6, 749-50). The idea that political insight follows from the accumulation of adequate knowledge, yet demands knowledge from experience to be successfully implemented we especially encounter in the *Political Treatise*. Already in the first paragraphs, Spinoza enumerates two fundamental traits separating wise politicians from naïve theoreticians. Not only do the former have the perspicuity to adequately conceive men as they are – as passionate beings – they also do not shrink from employing “those arts which they have learnt from long experience” (TP 1.1-2, 680). This is exactly the reason, Spinoza tells us, that laws “have been instituted and public affairs conducted by men of considerable intelligence, both astute and cunning” (TP 1.3, 681).

of the people. That's why, although he spoke somewhat more clearly than the other Prophets, he still taught these revelations obscurely, and quite frequently through parables, especially when he was speaking to those to whom it was not yet given to understand the kingdom of heaven. (TTP 4.32-3; GIII 65)

Spinoza's portrayal of Christ's activities indicate Jesus' awareness that the ideal religion – i.e. the natural divine law or inner religion which is based on reason – was unattainable for the majority of people. To prevent religion from losing its grip on the multitude, he presented his teachings in a law-like fashion, often using obscure parables. According to Spinoza's description, Christ realized that only by hiding certain things from the people – teaching his revelations obscurely – would he actually succeed in stimulating piety. Christ fell back on his political savvy, for only by obscuring the new covenant between God and man would it be possible for religion to prescribe to the multitude the ideal of a lifestyle devoted to loving-kindness and justice.

In his teachings to the masses, as we have seen, Jesus propagated the co-called 'tenets of universal faith' (for an enumeration of these *dogmata* see TTP 14.25-28; GIII 177-8). These beliefs represent the nucleus of the monotheistic Judeo-Christian religion we encounter in Scripture. They are grounded on an anthropomorphic conception of God as lawgiver or prince, whose image is meant to inspire justice and loving-kindness. In the TTP, Spinoza explicitly shows that this conception of God is closely connected with the imagination and lack of adequate knowledge. It is precisely because the majority of the prophets were endowed not "with a more perfect mind, but rather with a power of imagining unusually vividly" that they imagined God as a lawgiver (TTP 2.1; GIII 29). Spinoza would not hesitate to criticize, from a purely philosophical point of view, the anthropomorphic conception of God and the kind of obedience it entails. The following passage leaves little doubt:

Those who obey the laws are said to live under the law, and seem to be slaves. And really, whoever gives each one his due because he fears the gallows does act according to the command of another and is coerced by evil. He cannot be called just. But the person who gives to each his due because he knows the true reason for the laws and their necessity,

that person acts from a constant heart, and by his own decision, not that of another.  
(TTP 4.7-8; GIII 59)

People who practice loving-kindness by obedience to the anthropomorphic God of Scripture seem no more than slaves. This is because compliance is grounded in inadequate knowledge and motivated by external factors, namely *fear* of godly punishment or *hope* for the reward of salvation.<sup>159</sup> Only when people free themselves from bondage to the law by acting from a constant disposition and on the basis of their own decision can they truly be called just. The same message appears when Spinoza, referring to a passage in Paul, stresses the theological importance of Christ's coming. He writes that "God sent to all nations his Christ, who would free all equally from bondage to the law, so that they would no longer act well because of the Law's commandment, but because of a constant decision of the heart" (TTP 3.45; GIII 54).

The problem is that only very few people are actually capable of this kind of intellectual self-liberation. Our human bondage to the passions, as the *Ethics* testifies, is not easily overcome. Jesus knew that accommodating his message to the cognitive abilities of the people and giving it a legislative appearance was the most effective approach. Given Spinoza's emphasis on Jesus' twofold method of teaching, the biblical Christ of the TTP knew that by presenting the multitude with the image of a law-giving God who takes care of those who live piously and punishes those who fail to do so, could he impress devotion in the hearts of the people. In order to solidify obedience, Christ relied on and used the religious hopes and fears of the multitude. Instead of presenting the people with eternal truths that would not be understood (see also TTP 5.37; GIII 77), Jesus chose an alternative method of teaching that would be successful in encouraging justice and loving-kindness. By preserving and fostering the passions that benefited religion, Christ

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<sup>159</sup> In the previous chapter we saw that hope and fear operate as a constitutive parts of Spinoza's redefined version of revealed religion as presented in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. It is exactly because of its reliance on religious hopes and fears that the revealed divine law is able to support obedience, and stimulate just and charitable behavior in the multitude. Although throughout his corpus of work, Spinoza associates hope and fear with cognitive weakness and a temperament prone to destabilizing influence, he also acknowledges their potential use for sustaining civic concord.

would exhibit profound political insight. After all, the Spinozian politician knows that the multitude wishes to be guided “not at reason's prompting but through some common emotion, such as a common hope, or common fear” (TP 6.1, 700; see also TTP 4.6; GIII 58-9).

We now see that the biblical Christ as presented by Spinoza relied on three political strategies to ensure that his doctrine was capable of reigning in the hearts of the people. First, Jesus delivered his message in a way that accommodated the faculties of understanding present in the people. Second, he relied on craft by teaching obscurely and in fables. Third, he used the multitude's passionate nature to institute obedience. Having discussed Christ's politics of religion with regard to the masses, the following section examines Jesus' attitude towards the state as portrayed in the TTP.

### 5.3.2 JESUS AND THE STATE

There is no doubt that Spinoza's Christ exhibited an awareness for the importance of state authority and the rule of law. This does not mean that he always slavishly submitted his religious doctrine to the authority of the sovereign. As we shall see, Spinoza does not hesitate to confront us with a more revolutionary aspect of Christ's activities. In this section, we examine whether Christ's teachings can actually be considered as compatible with state authority. I argue that Jesus's religious doctrine unconditionally submits the multitude to the rule of law in so-called ‘good nations’. As we shall see, this is not necessarily the case in ‘bad nations’ where justice and loving-kindness are neglected. However, in order to avoid Jesus becoming labeled as a demagogue, Spinoza interprets his teachings in such a way that only the prophets, and not the people, have the right to actively oppose state authority.

In chapter 7 of the TTP, Spinoza claims that Christ only accepted the body politic as legitimate source of legal obligation in a so-called ‘good state’. This becomes clear in a passage where he discusses Jesus's famous creed ‘to a man who strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other’. It goes as following:

he said these things to oppressed men, who were living in a corrupt republic, where justice was completely neglected. Finally, he said it at a time when he saw the ruin of the republic to be near at hand. But we have seen that the very same thing Christ teaches here, when the ruin of the City is at hand, Jeremiah also taught at the first destruction of the City, i.e., at a similar time (see Lamentations 3:25-30). So the Prophets taught this only in a time of oppression, and nowhere put it forward as a law. ... From this it follows very clearly, just from the fundamental principles of Scripture, that this teaching of Christ and Jeremiah that we should submit to injuries, and yield to the impious in everything, is appropriate only in those places where justice is neglected and in times of oppression, but not in a good republic. Indeed, in a good republic, where justice is preserved, everyone is bound, if he wants to be thought just, to exact a penalty for injuries in the presence of a judge (see Leviticus 5:1) – not for the sake of vengeance (see Leviticus 19:17-18), but with the intention of defending justice and the laws of one's native land, and so that the evil should not profit by being evil. (TTP 7.32-3; GIII 103-4)

Spinoza tells that Christ's moral teaching is only appropriate in bad states. We can infer that in Spinoza's opinion, Christ expressed awareness that certain aspects of his doctrine would form a danger for state obedience. After all, the above mentioned creed would incite Christians to disregard the specific juridical context of the state they are living in. Instead of going to court and upholding the law, people would simply neglect the public procedures dealing with crime and punishment. This, of course, would be quite disastrous. How could Jesus successfully spread a message of justice and loving-kindness, if he himself would contribute to the demise of states that actually respect these very same principles? Spinoza's Jesus, for this reason, would make it clear that this teaching is valid only in certain situations. He preached it only to oppressed men, never to people living in a state where justice was defended.<sup>160</sup>

In bad states, on the other hand, Spinoza's Jesus apparently advised his audience to disregard the specific juridical context and let his own teachings come first. Given Spinoza's efforts to show that only the state has the authority to institute laws, this raises questions as to

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<sup>160</sup> Levene concurs. Jesus' maxim that one should turn the other cheek is valid only "in a corrupt commonwealth where justice is utterly disregarded" (*Spinoza's Revelation. Religion, Democracy, and Reason*, 159).

whether Christ can actually be merited for his political insight. However, it is questionable whether people following Christ's instructions in 'bad states' actually commit acts of civil disobedience. For someone to turn the cheek in a time of oppression, would simply mean for him to yield to the oppression already present in society. Jesus' teachings do not explicitly contain the demand to oppose state authority, only to refrain from violence and injustice.<sup>161</sup> There is, in other words, no certainty whether they actually endanger bad states. Other passages provide further clarification. After explaining that religion has always been adapted to the advantage of the state, Spinoza reflects as to whether this message is not in conflict with the fact that the Apostles were given the authority to preach religion in states where it was forbidden.<sup>162</sup> He answers as following:

I say that they did this by right of the control they had received from Christ over unclean Spirits (see Matthew 10:1). For above, at the end of Ch. 16, I explicitly warned that everyone was bound to keep faith even with a Tyrant, except that person to whom God, by a certain revelation, had promised special aid against the Tyrant. So it is not permissible for anyone to take this as an example, unless he also has the power to perform miracles. (TTP 19.31-32; GIII 233-4)

Spinoza confirms that the Apostles were given the authority to disregard state law in so-called tyrannical nations. This, however, was granted to the Apostles only. Normal persons have no other option than to obey state law since they lack the special divine 'protection' associated with the prophetic activity. The same message reappears in the *Tractatus Politicus*. Spinoza confirms that Jesus gave his Apostles, and them only, the authority to introduce religion in places where it was forbidden. According to Christ's teaching, Spinoza's says, the multitude should always comply

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<sup>161</sup> It is generally assumed that for Spinoza, the whole of Christ's teaching consist chiefly of the moral lessons taught by Jesus on the mount and described by Matthew in chapters 5-7 (TTP 11.15, annotation XXVII; Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 8). According to Matthew 5:38-40, Jesus stated the following: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth'. But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well". (Palmer, *The Holy Bible*, New International Version)

<sup>162</sup> See TTP 19.31; GIII 233: "But if anyone should ask now "By what right could Christ's disciples, who were private men, preach religion?"

with state authority, even in corrupt nations: “the burden of propagating religion should be left to God or to the sovereign, on whom alone devolves the care of public affairs” (TP 3.10, 693). In spite of all this, we cannot deny that Christ’s doctrine ultimately disregarded the authority of bad states. Whereas it remained doubtful whether ‘normal’ people could actually harm bad states when complying to Jesus’s teaching, the situation is different in case of the Apostles. Both the TTP and TP confirm that Jesus explicitly gave them the authority to go and teach religion in places where it was forbidden. Their activities in any case would be seen as threatening to the imposed rule. The question therefore arises as to whether Christ’s activities conflict with Spinoza’s own opinions concerning state obedience. At first sight one might think they do. After all, when individuals start disregarding state authority this can only lead to chaos and turmoil. Jesus, for this reason, could at first glance be labeled seditious.

On closer examination, however, this is beside the point. Spinoza’s discussion of the revolutionary dimension of Jesus’s doctrine is intended to teach us something entirely different. Spinoza tells us that two situations can occur in states where justice and loving-kindness are neglected. Either the state itself takes the necessary actions to avert this detrimental state of affairs, or God steps in (see TP 3.10, 693). This seems to imply that a state that actually does take the necessary measures has nothing to fear from prophets. In that case it simply evolves into a ‘good state’ whose authority cannot be challenged by true religion. But when a state fails to do so, this opens the door for possible revolutionary or subversive activity. The very possibility of prophetic disobedience should therefore be principally attributed to the organization of the state itself. The fact that Jesus gave the Apostles the authority to introduce religion is a mere consequence of the failing of the involved states.

Christ’s activities in time of civil decline therefore confront us with a crucial and not to be neglected political pattern. It shows that in situations where the state fails to fulfill its regulatory function, the danger exists that opposing forms of authority emerge. Spinoza’s portrayal of Christ’s activities in time of civil decay reminds us of a crucial limit imposed on the social

contract theory. It teaches statesmen that it is only by offering the multitude stability and safety, that they will be able to sustainably uphold their authority. Christ's actions towards the Apostles of course contain another political lesson. Spinoza makes it perfectly clear that no state will allow its sovereignty to be affected by an opposing form of authority. Correspondingly, the Christ of the TTP was fully aware that his disciples would pay a big price for their acts of civil disobedience. Indeed, only a miracle would save them.

In this section we addressed Jesus' attitude towards the state as portrayed by Spinoza. Although Jesus' teachings in regard to bad states could easily be interpreted as hostile to state authority, Spinoza refuses to see this as problematic. What matters is that Spinoza's Jesus unconditionally submits the multitude to the rule of law. Spinoza, moreover, does not straightforwardly condemn Christ's actions towards the Apostles; instead he uses Christian evangelism to sketch the limits of state authority. Questions of whether or not Jesus' actions towards the Apostles are to be regarded as seditious ultimately remain a matter of state.

In the following chapter, I situate Jesus' *modus operandi* as presented in the TTP within the broader framework of Spinoza's characterization of the prophetic activity. Specifically, I show that the political (or, using a perhaps more appropriate word, theologico-political) reading of Christ presented so far can be reconciled with Spinoza's depiction of Jesus as a trustworthy prophet and moral exemplar.



## CHAPTER 6: SPINOZA ON 'CHRIST ACCORDING TO THE FLESH': JESUS AS PHILOSOPHER-PROPHET. PART TWO: JESUS AS FAITHFUL MESSENGER OF GOD

According to my interpretation, the Christ of the TTP relied on his political savvy while addressing the multitude. Due to the historical and religious context Jesus worked in, it was useful for him to obscure the meaning of the new covenant between God and man. One potentially problematic conclusion of this reading is that Spinoza's Jesus relied on deceitful practices. After all, if Christ had a philosophical understanding of God, he must have been aware that the image of God as a lawgiver constituted nothing more than a corruption of the true divine nature. Spinoza's Jesus deliberately presented the people with philosophically 'untrue' tenets. Now, from the fact that God revealed himself immediately to Christ's mind, Spinoza infers that Christ perceived the things revealed truly and adequately; a portrayal that can easily incite readers to regard the biblical Christ of the TTP as an archetype of the perfect philosopher.<sup>163</sup> This interpretation is supported by the fact that Spinoza himself states that Jesus should be seen primarily as the 'mouth of God': "Christ was not so much a Prophet as the mouth of God" TTP 4.31; GIII 64). For this reason, Spinoza appears to prefer an image of Christ that is mainly philosophical. According to this interpretation, it would be intolerable to accept that Christ would ever resort to craft. This is because a true philosopher not only seeks the mind's greatest good – i.e. knowledge of God – for himself, but also desires this for others (EIVp37). The perfect philosopher always acts honestly, since only this is useful and good for him (EIVp72). Therefore these critics will argue, Christ should be freed from charges of manipulation.<sup>164</sup>

This chapter argues that objections related to the use of manipulative measures carry

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<sup>163</sup> Frankel considers Spinoza's Jesus as "the perfect philosopher" ("The Invention of Liberal Theology: Spinoza's Theological-Political Analysis of Moses and Jesus", 301). In a similar vein, Fraenkel interprets the Christ of the TTP "as the most accomplished philosopher of all times" (*Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza*, 266). Laux, in turn, describes Spinoza's Jesus as the ideal Spinozistic free man, "l'homme libre" (*Imagination et Religion chez Spinoza*, 276).

<sup>164</sup> Matheron can be seen as the most famous proponent of this line of thinking: "Impossible, par conséquent, de prétendre à la fois que le Christ était philosophe et qu'il a dit le contraire de ce qu'il pensait ... si son projet fondamental était vraiment de connaître et de faire connaître Dieu, il n'a rien pu dire de faux sur Dieu" (*Le Christ et le Salut des Ignorants*, 97).

force only insofar as one limits Christ's role in the TTP to that of a philosophical instructor. However, Spinoza's Jesus teaches both the natural and revealed divine law; it is his use of both the natural and prophetic light that makes him different from the common (Spinozist) philosopher. Specifically, I show that Christ's *modus operandi* towards the multitude accords perfectly with Spinoza's conception of religious prophecy set forward in the TTP. For Spinoza, obedience – not truth – is the primary objective of Scripture. The task of the prophet was to promote a lifestyle that takes God as an example, a lifestyle devoted to loving-kindness and justice. By relying on the image of God as lawgiver Spinoza's Jesus could successfully accomplish this goal. That is, the Christ of the TTP falls back on the parable of God as lawgiver due to its efficiency in leading people towards justice and charity. Spinoza's Christ presents people with philosophically unsound though salutary tenets of faith, and therefore should be considered a faithful messenger of God. For Spinoza, Christ is no false prophet nor an impostor; the recourse to measures that relate primarily to the passions and imaginings of people is an essential part of the prophetic model he uses.

I start off with an examination of EIVp54, in which Spinoza elaborates on the role of the prophet, his *modus operandi* and the value of his teachings for society. The proposition and its demonstration reflect a critique of 'Christian' values. Spinoza tells us that the affects of humility and repentance, in addition to hope and fear, indicate a person's lack of power. The scholium offers a crucial addition to this picture:

Because men rarely live from the dictate of reason, these two affects, Humility and Repentance, and in addition, Hope and Fear, bring more advantage than disadvantage. So since men must sin, they ought rather to sin in that direction. If weak-minded men were all equally proud, ashamed of nothing, and afraid of nothing, how could they be united or restrained by any bonds? The mob is terrifying, if unafraid. So it is no wonder that the Prophets, who considered the common advantage, not that of the few, commended Humility, Repentance, and Reverence so greatly. Really, those who are subject to these

affects can be guided far more easily than others, so that in the end they may live from the guidance of reason, i.e., may be free and enjoy the life of the blessed. (EIVp54s)

Spinoza tells us that the lack of power associated with the affects of humility and repentance becomes cushioned when these affects are collectively addressed. By working on the fears and hopes of the ‘weak-minded’ men, unity among the non-philosophical multitude can be strengthened. The affects appear as useful instruments that allow the mob to be guided. According to Spinoza, this explains why prophets who considered the common advantage especially made use of these passions. From the scholium we can infer two important points. First, for a prophet considering the common advantage, making use of these affects seems the effective way to go. Second, a prophet who considers the common advantage and uses these affects to steer the multitude ultimately does not prevent the masses from becoming free. According to Spinoza, prophetic activity is often characterized by its advantageous use of the ductility of the multitude. The prophet cunningly uses the affects of humility, repentance, hope and fear in order to strengthen his influence on the people. This kind of skillful molding benefits the multitude; the work of the prophet contributes to social cohesion and, in some way or another, forms an important step in the multitude’s ascent to reason.<sup>165</sup>

In what follows, I will voice the concern with deceitful prophets through the criticisms of Spinoza’s contemporaries, Lambert Van Velthuysen and Willem van Blyenbergh. In a letter to Jacob Ostens (January 1671), Van Velthuysen presented his correspondent with a summary of the main themes of the TTP.<sup>166</sup> Besides criticizing Spinoza’s concealed atheism, the Utrecht theologian expressed his deep concerns over the way God and the prophets were depicted. According to Van Velthuysen, Spinoza described the prophets as figures having no regard for

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<sup>165</sup> E.g. Rosenthal, ‘Why Spinoza Chose the Hebrews’, 231-4, ‘Persuasive Passions: Rhetoric and the Interpretation of Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*’ and James *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics*.

<sup>166</sup> Lambertus van Velthuysen (1622-1685) published many writings on natural law and politics. He is mainly known for his ‘apology’ of Hobbes’ *De Cive* (*Epistolica Dissertatio de principiis iusti, et decori, continens apologiam pro tractatu clarissimi Habbaei, De Cive*), published anonymously in 1651. See Van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza*, 75.

truth whatsoever. They presented the multitude with teachings that on closer examination, i.e. from the perspective of reason, are simply untrue (see Van Bunge, *From Stevin to Spinoza*, 112). Moreover, on Spinoza's account, this should not be counted against them: what matters is that their teachings are able to lead people to virtue. Given the multitude's disposition, the choice to fall back on legislative measures therefore seemed obvious (Ep. 42, 870). The following passage excludes Van Velthuysen from accusations of misreading the TTP, and so we should take his criticism seriously:

... the prophets have even gone so far as to advance arguments for promoting virtue which are not in themselves true, but were considered to be so by those they were addressing, and which were intrinsically of a kind to spur men on to a more eager devotion to virtue. He therefore assumes that God left the choice of arguments to the prophets, who would employ those suited to the times and to the modes of thought of their particular audiences who, in accordance with their understanding, would regard such arguments as good and effective. (Ep. 42, 874)

Van Velthuysen drew attention to what Spinoza had written in chapter 14 of the TTP. According to Spinoza, "faith does not require tenets which are true as much as it does tenets which are pious, i.e., tenets which move the heart to obedience, even if there are many among them which have not even a shadow of the truth, so long as the person who accepts them does not know them to be false" (TTP 14.20; GIII 176). For Van Velthuysen, the message here was quite clear. Spinoza had reduced the work of the prophets to an activity where absolute truth was no longer of primary importance; what mattered was that people believed that the teachings were true.<sup>167</sup> Although Spinoza did accept the moral excellency of the prophets, in Van Velthuysen's opinion, this was heavily overshadowed by the manipulative nature implicitly attributed to their activity.

Spinoza replied to the accusations against him in a letter to Ostens. He emphasized that "moral precepts, whether or not they receive the form of law from God himself, are still divine

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<sup>167</sup> Melamed concurs: "Obviously, the believer must believe that the tenets of faith are true, but those who disseminate and teach faith should not be much bothered by the truthfulness of the doctrines, but rather by their usefulness" ('The metaphysics of the *Theological-Political Treatise*', 135).

and salutary” (Ep. 43, 879). Whether the divine law is presented in the form of an eternal truth or in the form of commandments, this – from a pragmatic perspective – is irrelevant. Spinoza reminded his correspondent that a true conception of the divine law always entails a love of God, not from fear of punishment, nor from love of some other thing. What truly matters is that both forms are equally able to incite people to virtue:

... whether I maintain that this law of God received its authoritative form from God himself or whether I conceive it to be like the rest of God's decrees which involve eternal necessity and truth, it will nevertheless remain God's decree and a teaching for salvation. And whether I love God freely or through the necessity of God's decree, I shall still love God, and I shall be saved. (Ep. 43, 880)<sup>168</sup>

Van Velthuysen points out to Ostens that Spinoza had the audacity to degrade the holy prophets to manipulative teachers who value utility above truth. Confronted with these charges, Spinoza appeared unimpressed. He stood his ground and maintained that the prophets, even though they presented the divine law in the form of commandments, still provided the people with salutary moral precepts.

In Spinoza's earlier correspondence with Blyenbergh<sup>169</sup>, we find more straightforward evidence that the prophets presented the people an 'untrue' representation of the divine law. In letter 19, dated 5 January 1665, Spinoza writes:

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<sup>168</sup> We find a similar message in a letter to Oldenburg (December 1675): “moral precepts, whether or not they receive from God himself the form of command or law, are nonetheless divine and salutary, and whether the good that follows from virtue and the divine love is bestowed on us by God as judge, or whether it emanates from the necessity of the divine nature, it will not on that account be more or less desirable, just as on the other hand the evils that follow from wicked deeds and passions are not less to be feared because they necessarily follow from them” (Ep. 75, 945).

<sup>169</sup> Willem van Blyenbergh (1632-1696) was a Dordrecht regent and merchant. In 1674, he published a Dutch Cartesian refutation of Spinoza's *Treatise* entitled *De Waerheyt van de Chrstelijcke Gods-Dienst ende Autoriteyt der H.Schriften, Beweert Tegen de Argumenten der Ongodtsdienstige, of een wederlegginge van dat Godt-lasterlijcke Boeck genoemt Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*The Truth of the Christian religion and Authority of Holy Scripture defended against the Arguments of the Irreligious, or a Refutation of that blasphemous Book entitled Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*). See Israel, 'The early Dutch and German reaction to the *Tractatus*', 89. For more on Spinoza's correspondence with Blyenbergh, see Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 30-43, Van Bunge, 'A Tragic Idealist: Jacob Ostens', 270-1, and Schneider, 'A Spiritual automaton: Spinoza, Reason, and the letters to Blyenbergh'.

... that Scripture, being particularly adapted to the needs of the common people, continually speaks in merely human fashion, for the common people are incapable of understanding higher things. That is why I think that all that God has revealed to the Prophets as necessary for salvation is set down in the form of law, and in this way the Prophets made up a whole parable depicting God as a king and lawgiver, because he had revealed the means that lead to salvation and perdition, and was the cause thereof. ... All their words were adjusted to the framework of this parable rather than to truth. (Ep. 19, 809)

Spinoza explicitly tells us that the prophets used parables that were tailored for the mentality of the people rather than loyal to truth. Because of the people's incapacity to perceive his decrees as eternal truths, God himself revealed through prophecy the requirements for salvation in a human fashion. In the hands of the prophets the divine law became anthropomorphized and represented by the parable of God as king and lawgiver. Moreover, according to Spinoza no philosopher will ever find this imaginative portrayal and use of words a stumbling block (Ep. 19, 810). Blyenbergh disagreed: to state that God ordered the prophets to depart from his original meaning has far-reaching consequences. God, in that case, would have willed something self-contradictory, which is absurd: "for God must have had a definite purpose in revealing his Word; but his purpose could not have been to lead men into error, thereby, for that would be a contradiction in God" (Ep. 20, 819). Spinoza, in turn, accuses Blyenbergh of confusion and misunderstanding:

I think that by parable you understand something quite different from what is generally accepted. Who has ever heard that a man who expresses his concepts in parables goes astray from his intended meaning? When Micaiah told King Ahab that he had seen God sitting on his throne and the celestial hosts standing on his right hand and on his left and that God asked them who would deceive Ahab that was surely a parable wherein the Prophet on that occasion (which was not one for teaching the high doctrines of theology) sufficiently expressed the main purport of the message he was charged to deliver in God's name. So in no way did he stray from his intended meaning. Likewise the other prophets by God's command made manifest to the people the Word of God in this way, as being the best means - though not means enjoined by God - of leading people to the primary

objective of Scripture, which according to Christ himself consists of loving God above all things, and your neighbour as yourself (Ep. 21, 827).

According to Spinoza, it is a mistake to claim that parables contradict the intended meaning of the prophets who made use of them.<sup>170</sup> He urges Blyenbergh to remind himself of the main message that the prophets were charged to deliver in God's name. They were sent to teach the people the universal foundation of the whole religion, namely the precept to love God above else and your neighbor as yourself. Their task was to promote loving-kindness and justice. By relying on the parable of God as a king and lawgiver, the prophets could successfully accomplish this goal.<sup>171</sup> Due to its efficiency in bringing about the primary objective of the prophetic undertaking, the parable sufficiently expresses God's intended meaning. For this reason, the prophets should still be considered "the trusted counselors and faithful messengers of God" (Ep. 21, 827).

Spinoza's reflections on the use of parables are of great importance. The TTP states that Jesus himself relied on the parable of God as king and lawgiver while addressing the multitude. Jesus, to use Spinoza's terms, adjusted his words "to the framework of this parable rather than to truth" (Ep. 19, 810). Like other prophets, he presented the people an image of God in clear contradiction with a true philosophical conception of substance.<sup>172</sup> However, the case of Jesus is a peculiar one. The majority of the prophets perceived God confusedly because of their defective knowledge. They relied on an anthropomorphic conception of God because they themselves

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<sup>170</sup> Spinoza urges Blyenbergh to consider the generally accepted meaning of parables. A decent account of how parables were commonly understood in the 17<sup>th</sup> century can be found in Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*. According to Bacon, parables are narratives "applied only to express some special purpose or conceit." He distinguishes two specific and opposite usages: either to "demonstrate and illustrate that which is taught," or "to retire and obscure it: that is when the secrets and mysteries of religion, policy, or philosophy are involved in fables or parables." Bacon, moreover, claims that in 'divine poesy' the use of the latter kind of 'parabolical wisdom' is always authorized (Adv., 187).

<sup>171</sup> Spinoza does not hesitate to emphasize the pedagogical usefulness of narratives: "because deducing a thing solely from intellectual notions very often requires a long chain of perceptions, plus extreme caution, mental perceptiveness, and restraint – all of which are rarely found in men – men would rather be taught by experience" (TTP 5.36; GIII 77). For more on the importance of narratives in Spinoza's overall system, see e.g. James, 'Narrative as the means to freedom: Spinoza on the uses of imagination' and Rosenthal, 'Spinoza and the philosophy of history'.

<sup>172</sup> In his response to Blyenbergh (Ep. 21, 823), Spinoza very clearly distances himself from the anthropomorphic conception of God.

lacked an adequate understanding of substance (see e.g. TTP 2.41; III/40). Consequently, these prophets were unaware that they presented God in a philosophically unsound manner. This clearly does not apply to Jesus. The biblical Jesus of the TTP must have been aware that he presented the people a corruption of the true divine nature. More evidence for this interpretation (or inference) follows from Spinoza's observations concerning the usage of parables; the prophets who relied on them did this very consciously. They considered the parable as the best means available of leading people to the primary objective of Scripture. They actively and consciously constructed, or to use Spinoza's words, made up a parable.

Moreover, Spinoza would make clear that the usage of parables should not be counted against the prophet. By doing so, he implicitly excuses Jesus, though he had a philosophical understanding of things, from the maxim to always act honestly. Indeed, what matters for Spinoza is that by relying on parables, Spinoza's Jesus succeeded in bringing about obedience. Now, this move appears to be in contradiction with EIVp72. However, if we take a close look at the proposition it becomes apparent that this is not the case. Spinoza tells us that if a man acted dishonestly from reason, he would justify dishonesty for everyone. Reason itself would then undermine cooperation and the common laws, which is absurd. Therefore, a free man always acts honestly. This, however, does not necessarily apply to everyone. In the case of a sovereign, who makes or sanctions the laws, the case might be quite different. After all, in the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza explicitly states that it does not "matter for the security of the state what motives induce men to administer its affairs properly, provided that its affairs are in fact properly administered" (TP 1.6, 682) The statesman, in order to consolidate the principal virtue of the state, i.e. its security, will have to ensure that people, whatever their personal motives, are led to act for the common good. That is, the commonwealth should be organized in a way that stimulates even the most irrational subjects to identify their private interests with the interest of the state.

Our previous inquiries into the nature of the prophetic activity all echo this idea. Spinoza in EIVp54 shows how the prophet uses the affects of humility, repentance, hope and fear in



order to strengthen his grip on the multitude. Since this kind of skillful molding contributes to social cohesion and ultimately benefits the multitude, Spinoza saw nothing blameworthy about it. The prophets simply used the means at their disposal. What matters is that the multitude is guided towards obedience. The letters to Blyenbergh and Ostens confirm this interpretation. Even though the presented doctrines are philosophically ‘untrue,’ this is more or less irrelevant from a pragmatic perspective. What matters is that people have the impression that they are actually true. When this is the case, an anthropomorphic conception of God has the potential to be as salutary as a philosophical understanding of substance.

In this chapter we saw that Christ’s reliance on craft and parabolic language fully accords with Spinoza’s broader conception of prophecy, and does not need to conflict with the former’s qualification as a philosopher-prophet. Spinoza’s portrait of Christ as a philosopher who still saw it fit to rely on obscure language while addressing the multitude would not only arouse suspicion in Christian circles. For the philosophical reader (*philosophe lector*) of the TTP familiar with Maimonides’ views on prophecy, Spinoza’s description of Jesus shows a remarkable, to say the least unexpected, resemblance to the actions of the Maimonidean philosopher-prophet. The following chapter will first examine these similarities, after which it investigates whether the notion of the philosopher-prophet can still be maintained given Spinoza’s critique of Maimonides in the TTP.

## CHAPTER 7: SPINOZA ON 'CHRIST ACCORDING TO THE FLESH': JESUS AS PHILOSOPHER-PROPHET. PART THREE: JESUS AS CONSEQUENTIALIST

This chapter considers whether the model of Christ as philosopher-prophet can be maintained given Spinoza's explicit critique of Maimonides in the TTP. In Chapter 15 of this work, Spinoza distances himself from so-called dogmatic approaches to the interpretation of Scripture. According to this view, faith ought to be accommodated to reason. That is, the teachings of the Bible are to be understood in such a way that they are accommodated to the true pronouncements of philosophy. Underlying this view is the notion of prophets as full-blooded philosophers who adapted the prescriptions of reason to the imaginations of the people. In their teachings towards the uneducated multitude, prophets presented or portrayed allegorically (viz. by means of parables and laws) the true doctrines of philosophy. In Spinoza's view, however, philosophy and faith have nothing in common with one another: theology should not be subservient to reason, nor should reason be subservient to theology (TTP 15.1; GIII 180). Spinoza's depiction of Christ as a philosopher who simultaneously relies on the imagination to teach the masses therefore poses a serious objection to the thesis here presented. If Spinoza's Christ is indeed a (Maimonidean) philosopher-prophet, Spinoza would end up supporting a position he himself attacks in the TPP.

The goal of this chapter is two-fold. First, to establish that the model of Christ as philosopher-prophet can be maintained regardless of Spinoza's critique of the Maimonidean conception of prophecy and the mode of Scriptural interpretation (allegory) that is consistent with it. Second, to provide an alternative to those readings of Spinoza's Christ that turn Spinoza into a dogmatic philosopher who ascribes to the Bible a demonstrably true philosophical core (viz. Matheron's *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants* and Fraenkel's *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza*). Against such interpretations, I argue that Spinoza's Christ primarily presents himself as a philosopher-prophet in light of his two-fold method of teaching: when confronted with an ignorant and stubborn multitude he teaches his revelations obscurely through parables (like the

prophets before him); yet speaking to those who are capable of knowing ‘the mysteries of the heavens’ he teaches in terms of eternal truths (as a philosopher would). However, Spinoza’s Christ should not be mistaken for a Maimonidean philosopher-prophet: his teachings towards the masses are not derived from reason via a translation of philosophical insight into imaginative language. In line with the argument in the preceding chapters it is argued that Spinoza’s Jesus instructs non-philosophers by means of parables and imaginative language mainly due to their effectiveness in leading people towards justice and charity. Spinoza’s Christ, a theological innovator and moral teacher who transcended the vulgar conception of the deity, embraces the anthropomorphic image of God due to its motivational efficacy in bringing about obedience.

Let me begin with a brief discussion of Maimonides’ conception of prophecy set forward in *The Guide of the Perplexed*. According to Maimonides, prophecy represents a unique source of knowledge grounded upon the perfection of both the rational and imaginative faculties (Guide II, Ch. 36, 369). All prophets are philosophers (e.g. Pines, ‘Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Maimonides, and Kant’, 9). That is, the intellectual emanation flowing from the active intellect conveys knowledge in physics and metaphysics.<sup>173</sup> Prophets, however, distinguish themselves from ‘mere’ philosophers by a continuation of this overflow to the imagination (Ibid., Ch. 37, 374). They have highly developed intellectual and imaginative faculties,<sup>174</sup> a combination that makes them especially suited as educators and governors. Making full use of the imagination’s mimetic function<sup>175</sup> prophets are able to represent theoretical knowledge in symbolic and

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<sup>173</sup> Maimonides elaborates on the significance of knowledge in ‘these great matters’ in *Mishneh Torah*, Yesode ha-Torah 4:13, referring to chapters 1-4.

<sup>174</sup> It should be noted that according to Maimonides this description of prophecy does not apply to Moses who alone “heard Him [God] ... without action on the part of the imaginative faculty” (Guide II, Ch. 46, 403). Spinoza’s Jesus, it has been argued, assumes a similar role in the TTP (see, for instance, Pines, ‘Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Maimonides, and Kant’ and Zac, ‘*Spinoza et l’interprétation de l’Écriture*, 73).

<sup>175</sup> Maimonides distinguishes three functions of the imagination (e.g. Guide II, Ch. 36, 370). For more on the mimetic function of the imagination see Walzer, ‘Al-Fârâbî’s Theory of Prophecy and Divination’, 142-148 and Ravven, ‘Some Thoughts on what Spinoza Learned from Maimonides about the Prophetic

figurative language, making it accessible to those who are unable to achieve, or have not yet achieved, rational perfection (e.g. Ravven,, ‘Some Thoughts on what Spinoza Learned from Maimonides about the Prophetic Imagination: Part 1’, 196-99; Fraenkel, ‘Philosophy and Exegesis in Al-Fârâbî, Averroes, and Maimonides’). By means of rhetorical and poetical devices grounded in the imagination, prophets apply conceptual knowledge to practical socio-political life.<sup>176</sup> Parables are the prophetic instrument par excellence (Guide II, Ch. 47, 407), but Maimonides also includes “obscurity and brevity” as important tools of presentation (Guide I, introduction, 8).

Maimonides explains that the Torah is written in such a way that those for whom “it is not within their powers to understand these [divine] matters as they truly are” still are able “to begin with it and learn” from it (Guide I, Ch. 33, 71). While parables serve an important pedagogical function, it is extremely “harmful to make clear the meaning of the parables of the prophets and to draw attention to the figurative senses of terms used in addressing people” (Guide I, Ch. 33, 70). The prophets were wise to present people parables adjusted to their capacities, for had they already from the start revealed the truths of the divine science figuratively expressed or contained in Scripture, “confusion” and “absolute negation” of their belief would have been the result (Guide I, Ch. 33, 71). These truths have been “hidden because at the outset the intellect is incapable of receiving them; only flashes of them are made to appear so that the perfect man should know them. On this account they are called “*secrets and mysteries of the Torah*”.

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Imagination: Part 1, 196-7, ‘Some Thoughts on what Spinoza Learned from Maimonides about the Prophetic Imagination: Part 2’, 386-388.

<sup>176</sup> It should be noted that not all prophets necessarily communicate their revelations to others (Guide II, Ch. 37, 373-4). Maimonides does not subordinate the life of contemplation to the life of action. The contemplation and *demonstration* of philosophical truths regarding God’s governance of the universe remains the epitome of human perfection (e.g. Guide III, Ch. 51, 620). There is nonetheless considerable discussion among scholars on how to reach the so-called ‘fifth perfection’, which highlights the importance of imitating God’s actions. Maimonides’ approach to *imitatio dei* has been interpreted as being either primarily intellectual, practical-political or ethical. Although there remains an obvious tension between the theoretical life and the life of action, many have argued that Maimonides posits the later as a consequence of the former. See, for instance, Shatz, ‘Maimonides’ Moral Theory’, 167-192; Altman, ‘Maimonides’ Four Perfections’, 15-24; Kreisel, ‘Imitatio Dei in Maimonides’ ‘Guide of the Perplexed’, 185. For a good overview of the relevant literature, see the notes and bibliography in Menachem Kellner’s *Maimonides on Human Perfection*.

Hence Maimonides distinguishes between the multitude to whom Scripture speaks through parables, and the ‘perfect man’ – i.e. he who is able of “demonstrative speculation and true intellectual inference” (Ibid.) – capable of representing these matters in their truth and essence.

When we redirect attention to Spinoza’s portrayal of Christ’s activities in the TTP, the resemblance with Maimonides’ description of the actions of the prophets in the *Guide* becomes apparent. Let us have one more look at the salient passage:

Christ, therefore, perceived the things revealed truly and adequately. If he ever prescribed them as laws, he did this because of the people's ignorance and stubbornness. So in this respect *he acted in the role of God*, because he accommodated himself to the mentality of the people. That's why, although he spoke somewhat more clearly than the other Prophets, he still taught these revelations *obscurely*, and quite frequently *through parables*, especially when he was speaking to those to whom it was not yet given to understand the kingdom of heaven. (TTP 4.32-3; GIII 65, emphasis mine)

In short, by presenting his philosophically-advanced followers with propositions about the real nature of things while relying on parables and obscure language to instruct the multitude, Spinoza’s Christ adopts an essential trademark of the Maimonidean philosopher-prophet.

Spinoza’s claim that Christ ‘acted in the role of God’ can arguably also be read as another silent reference to the *Guide*. Nearing the end of the book, having posited the perfection of the intellect as man’s *summum bonum*, Maimonides (referring to Jeremiah 9:22-23) makes the following observation:

For when explaining in this verse the noblest ends, he does not limit them only to the apprehension of Him ... But he says that one should glory in the apprehension of Myself and in the knowledge of My attributes, by which he means His actions ... In this verse he makes it clear to us that *those actions that ought to be known and imitated are loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness*. (Guide III, Ch. 54, 637; emphasis mine)

According to Maimonides, people should strive to imitate God’s loving-kindness, justice and righteousness in preserving the cosmic order. A number of commentators have convincingly

argued that Maimonides' claim should not be read merely as an advocacy for ethical self-government, but rather as an affirmation that political leadership constitutes the culmination of practical perfection. On this reading, the prophet above all presents himself as a moral and civic leader, exhorting people to lead a just and righteous life according to their capacity.<sup>177</sup>

Spinoza's unforgiving critique of the Maimonidean account of prophecy in the TTP poses a serious objection to the thesis here presented. After all, if Christ is a philosopher-prophet, he fits Maimonides' description of the prophet as someone who has both a powerful intellect *and* imagination that allows him to communicate philosophical truths through devices such as parables; a description of the prophet that Spinoza does not seem to accept (see for instance Pines, 'Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Maimonides, and Kant', 10-11). Furthermore, Spinoza attacks the mode of Scriptural interpretation (allegory) that is consistent with Maimonides' view of prophecy as being both rational and imaginative (TTP 7.75; GIII 113 and onwards). If Christ were a *Maimonidean* philosopher-prophet, then Spinoza would be committed to the truth of a mode of Scriptural interpretation that he explicitly attacks. Indeed, Nadler emphasizes that "Spinoza is deeply concerned to combat this [Maimonidean] notion of the philosopher-prophet" (*A book forged in hell*, 65). In order to answer to these objections I present the following arguments.

First, I argue that the characterization of Jesus as a philosopher-prophet does not conflict with Spinoza's conception of prophecy set forward in the TTP. Although prophecy is exemplified by Moses – who is not a philosopher, but has a particularly vivid imagination – Spinoza opens up the possibility for a prophet to perceive God's revelations adequately without the imagination. He provides a cognitive definition of prophecy in terms of the way the prophets perceived their revelations, i.e. either 'mediately' through words and or images (TTP 1.9; GIII 17)

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<sup>177</sup> For the political approach to Maimonides' *imitatio Dei* see especially Berman, 'The Political Interpretation of the Maxim: The Purpose of Philosophy Is the Imitation of God', 53-61. See also Pines' introduction to the *Guide*, CXXI-II and Kreisel, 'Imitatio Dei in Maimonides' 'Guide of the Perplexed', 191.

or ‘immediately’ through the mind alone (TTP 1.25; GIII 21). However, the TTP does not disallow for a prophet belonging to the latter category (i.e. Christ) to fall back on imaginative resources in order to propagate his religious doctrine. Following Norbert Samuelson and Heidi Ravven we can distinguish between the productive and receptive function of the imagination.<sup>178</sup> Although Spinoza’s Christ receives his revelations in a conceptual way, he – as TTP 4.32-4 makes clear – still uses his imagination ‘productively’ to accommodate his teaching to the understanding of the masses.

To be clear, I am not committed to the much stronger claim that Christ’s teachings towards the masses are derived from reason via a translation of philosophical insight into imaginative language. The dogma’s of faith Christ teaches the multitude are derived from experience via the imagination and are compatible with reason only in a limited respect. They are established by the testimony of Scripture alone as the principal imaginative ideas that conduce to faith and obedience.<sup>179</sup> However, I do maintain that Spinoza’s Christ fell back on the imaginative language of his predecessors – i.e. the anthropomorphic image of God as lawgiver – because this allowed him to efficiently promote the message of justice and charity. Spinoza, for good reasons, stresses “that Christ did not at all repeal the law of Moses” (TTP 5.9; GIII 71). Despite the differences between both Testaments, he maintains that the “[books of the New Testament are]

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<sup>178</sup> Maimonides emphasizes the uniqueness of Moses’s prophecy by claiming that the latter did not rely on the imagination. In order to solve the apparent tension with Maimonides’ claim in the *Guide* that the Torah and the Law are essentially imaginative, Samuelson distinguishes between the productive and receptive function of the imagination. See his ‘Comments on Maimonides’ concept of Mosaic prophecy’, 9-25. Ravven argues that Spinoza “adopted Maimonides’ conception of prophecy as *mimetic* or *productive* and not - or chiefly - as receptive”. She formulates this as following: “the prophet is interpreter in imaginative terms, whether he reformulates belief imaginatively or instead merely understands it in that way himself to begin with” (“Some Thoughts on what Spinoza Learned from Maimonides about the Prophetic Imagination: Part 2”, 387).

<sup>179</sup> Schlomo Pines draws an interesting comparison between Spinoza’s dogma’s of faith and Maimonides’ ‘necessary beliefs’. Maimonides distinguishes between ‘true beliefs’ and ‘necessary beliefs’ (see *Guide*, 3:28). Whereas the former reflect philosophical truth, the latter, as Pines indicates, “have no reference whatever to truth”. Necessary beliefs – e.g. “that God is violently angry with those who disobey Him”, or that “He responds instantaneously to the prayer of someone wronged or deceived” – serve only a political purpose (“Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Maimonides, and Kant”, 35). They are necessary for political welfare alone. Pines simultaneously recognizes a difference between Spinoza’s dogmata and Maimonides’ ‘necessary beliefs’. While the former are contrary to the truth, the latter are not: “they may legitimately be interpreted both with philosophical truth and otherwise. For an interesting discussion of Pines’ work, see Harvey, ‘Shlomo Pines on Maimonides, Spinoza, and Kant’.

not [new] because they are different in doctrine” (TTP 12.24; GIII 163).

Second, I argue that Spinoza presents the Christ of the TTP in such a manner as to exclude a full identification with the Maimonidean philosopher-prophet. Earlier we saw that Maimonides presents religion as a vulgarized version of philosophy that communicates core philosophical truths pictorially and symbolically. Scripture is seen as a pedagogical instrument in which the prophets present their philosophical insights, albeit transformed and reworked for popular consumption. Maimonides, for this reason, stresses the philosophical excellence of the prophets who not only excelled in piety but were equally well versed in physics and metaphysics.

As noted above, Spinoza’s critique of the Maimonidean dogmatic position is directed against this idea of prophets as full-blooded philosophers. Scripture, he tells us, contains no true knowledge concerning speculative matters: “So those who eagerly search the prophetic books for wisdom, and knowledge of both natural and spiritual matters go completely astray” (TTP 2.2; GIII 29). Spinoza’s reading of Scripture reveals that we praise prophets for their piety and constancy of heart, “not for the loftiness and excellence of their understanding” (TTP 2.31; GIII 37). To put it differently: the goal of philosophy is truth, while the goal of faith is nothing but obedience and piety. Whereas philosophical and prophetic truth for Maimonides are always consistent, and never collide, Spinoza maintains a clear demarcation between philosophy and theology. Spinoza, for this reason, distances himself from the Maimonidean mode of Scriptural interpretation that urges one to accommodate the words of the prophets to established philosophical truths in case of conflict.

However, although Spinoza emphatically emphasizes the separation of philosophy and theology, he does admit an important point of contact between the two realms: “the prophets taught no moral doctrine which does not most fully agree with reason” (TTP 15.35; GIII 186; see also TTP 15.24; GIII 185). Philosophy affirms that the prophets held correct opinions concerning “loving-kindness and how to conduct our lives” (TTP 2.52; GIII 42. See also TTP 7.11; GIII 99: “As for the moral teachings also contained in the Bible, ... they can be



demonstrated from common notions”). Even so, theology still cannot be considered as the handmaid of philosophy: Scripture’s fundamental doctrine – i.e. the idea that men are saved by simple obedience – cannot be philosophically confirmed or denied (TTP 15.26; GIII 185). Given that only revelation can reassure us that a life of obedience is sufficient for salvation, theology remains in full charge of its own domain.

Crucially, the here presented thesis that Christ is as philosopher-prophet does not endanger the autonomy of either of these two enterprises. Spinoza very carefully writes that Christ’s adequate perception of things has for its object divine revelations – Christ “perceived the things revealed truly and adequately” TTP 4.32-4; GIII 65). We have already noted that Spinoza does not provide much guidance on how to interpret such passages. As a result, commentators have interpreted this claim in a variety of ways. However, regardless of how one settles this interpretative puzzle, Spinoza never gives any indication that the Biblical Christ had any other philosophical knowledge than knowledge concerning loving-kindness and how to live our lives. Of course, from the fact that Christ teaches some of his followers eternal truths we can infer his awareness of the fact that God – from a philosophical point of view – does not issue edicts like a prince. Spinoza’s Christ must have been aware that the anthropomorphic image of God does not correspond with His actual nature. Furthermore, as we have seen in the previous chapters, he clearly had a good understanding of human moral psychology and the workings of the body. Put differently, Christ had adequate ideas, and for this exact reason, could not have been prevented from knowledge of metaphysical truths (see EIIp40). However, and this is significant, Spinoza nowhere attributes to Christ the wide range of knowledge in matters of physics and metaphysics commonly associated with the Maimonidean philosopher-prophet. Ultimately, Christ is presented as a moral exemplar who truly understood religion’s core message ‘to love God and one’s neighbor’.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Schlomo Pines, it should be noted, takes a different approach. He argues that Spinoza must have been aware that the Bible does not provide evidence for the opinion that Christ held the philosophical view of God. Spinoza turned Christ “into a philosopher in order to be able to claim the supreme religious

More important to our present discussion is Spinoza's claim that Christ adequately perceived the conditions which lead men to salvation. This is a remarkable statement given Spinoza's claim that "the power of reason does not extend to the point of being able to determine that men can be blessed by obedience alone, without understanding things" (TTP 15.22; GIII 184). After all, according to Spinoza's description, Christ had an understanding of this core teaching of theology. By admitting that Christ alone had adequate – possibly intuitive – knowledge of the fundament of theology, Spinoza again suggests that the divide between philosophy and theology, at least in matters of morality, is not as absolute as one might think. However, Spinoza seems aware that his portrayal of Christ requires him to make additional clarifications in order to fully uphold the independence of both realms. He suddenly weakens his claim by writing that "this fundamental tenet of theology cannot be tracked down by the natural light - *or at least that there has been no one who has demonstrated it* - and therefore that revelation has been most necessary" (TTP 15.26; GIII/85; emphasis mine). Spinoza's caution can be explained in reference to his portrayal of Christ. By emphasizing that the latter fully understood, yet never demonstrated the fundament of theology, Spinoza's Jesus does not undermine the separation of theology and philosophy. In short, by emphasizing that no one has actually *demonstrated* the foundation of theology, Spinoza's Christ circumvents the TTP's critique of Maimonides. Or, to phrase it somewhat differently, Spinoza presents Christ in such a way as to exclude a full identification with the Maimonidean philosopher-prophet.

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sanction for his universal religion" ("Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Maimonides, and Kant', 45). Pines has good reason to question Spinoza here. To back up his claim that Christ relied on a two-fold method of teaching, Spinoza in Chapter 4 refers to "Matthew 13:10 *etc.*" (TTP 4.33; GIII 65; emphasis mine). In Matthew 13:10 we clearly find support for Spinoza's thesis that Jesus taught one thing to the masses, while something else to his disciples. However, as Curley points out, Matthew 13:40 also reveals that even in his teachings towards the elect Christ still used vividly apocalyptic language (see 'Homo Audax', section 3). Like Pines, Curley therefore questions whether Spinoza actually believed that Jesus was free from the anthropomorphic conception of God. This is undoubtedly a point worth considering. However, while it would be silly to deny some level of irony here, alternative interpretive options present themselves. As argued above, there is no need to consider Spinoza's Christ as a truly accomplished philosopher: his knowledge may perfectly well be limited to matters of morality and 'how to live our lives'. Moreover, Spinoza's subtle but powerful reference to Jesus' view of eschatology (or eschatological language) in 'Matthew 13:10 *etc.*' also could be read as another indication of Jesus' (theologico-political) savvy while teaching religion.

If Spinoza never intended to identify the Christ of the TTP with the Maimonidean philosopher-prophet, the question still remains why he chose to present Christ's *modus operandi* in a Maimonidean guise. Readers could object that although Spinoza's Christ might not be a Maimonidean philosopher-prophet in the strict sense, this does not by itself entail a full condemnation of the Maimonidean conception of religion as an 'imitation of philosophy'.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, Spinoza's language remains elusive. His claim that no one, including Christ, ever demonstrated the foundation of theology can be read in opposing ways.

First, it could imply that knowledge of the foundation of theology is within human reach, but that such a cognition is never accompanied by a full understanding of the principles on which its adequacy is grounded. Spinoza's Christ adequately perceived the foundation of theology; he never demonstrated it because this is impossible. The separation between philosophy and theology is firmly upheld since no one (including Christ) is ever capable of demonstrating the foundation of theology. On this reading, religion cannot be seen as an 'imitation' of philosophy: theology's fundamental teaching has no demonstrable counterpart in philosophy.

Or, second, it could also suggest, despite earlier claims to the contrary (TTP 15.22; III/184), that such a possibility exist. Christ could have rationally demonstrated the underlying metaphysical propositions, but chose not to. The separation between philosophy and theology still stands. However, theology only remains in charge of its domain because of Christ's decision not to leave mankind with a philosophical demonstration of the foundation of theology! On this reading, religion could still be seen as an imitation of philosophy: theology's fundamental teaching has a demonstrable counterpart in philosophy.

The suggestion that Spinoza's intention in the TTP was to reveal to his more perceptive readers that the foundation of theology can in fact be rationally demonstrated, has severe

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<sup>181</sup> The concept of religion as an imitation or replacement of philosophy is deeply rooted in medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy. In the TTP, Spinoza's associates the so-called dogmatic approach mainly with Maimonides, but the view, as is well known, goes back to Al-Fârâbî. See, for instance, Fraenkel, 'Philosophy and Exegesis in Al-Fârâbî, Averroes, and Maimonides' and Fraenkel, 'Spinoza on Philosophy and Religion: The Averroistic Sources'.

implications. On this reading (one famously advanced by Matheron),<sup>182</sup> Spinoza had good reasons to attribute to Christ a demonstrable understanding of the foundation of theology. By doing so, Spinoza could indicate that the true content of the Bible contains truth and corresponds to the doctrines demonstrated in philosophy. For Spinoza's Christ, the foundation of theology was no article of faith but a demonstrable philosophical truth. Confronted with the shortcomings of the multitude, he presented them with an anthropomorphized version of his philosophical insights. However, and this is crucial, the tenets of faith ultimately are true and consistent with what Spinoza argues in the *Ethics*. That is, the seven tenets (including the foundation of theology) each can be reinterpreted in a non-anthropomorphic (Spinozist) fashion. For Matheron, Spinoza's Christ is a Spinozist *avant la lettre*;<sup>183</sup> that is, Christ's God and the God of the *Ethics* are one and the same.<sup>184</sup>

Matheron's interpretation remains controversial, and has, in my opinion, been successfully confronted by commentators like Verbeek (*Spinoza's Theologico-political Treatise: Exploring 'the Will of God'*) and Garber ("Should Spinoza have published his philosophy?"). Indeed, it remains extremely hard to see how the biblical image of God – modelled in the TTP around the seven tenets of faith – can ever be made consistent with the radically anti-anthropomorphic conception of God put forward in the *Ethics*. Furthermore, in order for Matheron's analysis to work (viz. in order for Spinoza's Christ to have had demonstrable knowledge of the foundation of theology), the Christ of the TTP must have possessed a perplexing, almost incredible

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<sup>182</sup> It is important to note that Matheron himself nowhere indicates or concludes that his reading of Christ presented in *Le Christ et le salut des Ignorants* turns Spinoza into a dogmatic philosopher. However, as far as I can see, his position ultimately amounts to exactly this. According to Matheron, faith can be interpreted according to both the imagination and reason. He maintains that the allegorical content of religion corresponds to the doctrines demonstrated in philosophy. Furthermore, Spinoza's Christ had demonstrable knowledge of the tenets of faith, including the foundation of theology (*Le Christ et le salut des Ignorants*, 94-127).

<sup>183</sup> "Jésus était spinoziste en pleine connaissance de cause" (*Le Christ et le salut des Ignorants chez Spinoza*, 126).

<sup>184</sup> A similar reading is found in Fraenkel. See his 'Could Spinoza Have Presented the Ethics as the True Content of the Bible?', 'Spinoza on Philosophy and Religion: The Averroistic Sources' and *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza*. He writes: "[Spinoza's] portrait of Christ implies that Christ deduced the teachings of the Divine Law through the same chain of logical inferences by which they are deduced in the *Ethics*" (*Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza*, 267).

sounding, amount of knowledge.<sup>185</sup> According to Matheron, he must have had an adequate insight into the individual essences of *all* human beings. That is, Spinoza's Jesus not only knew that each person's individual essence repeatedly reinstantiates itself throughout history, he also understood that human beings at least once will be 'reincarnated' in a perfect political society. In short, followers of Matheron must not only attribute to Spinoza the belief in multiple temporally successive instantiations of individual essences, they must also concede that Spinoza's Christ had perfect foresight of each individual's reincarnation throughout history.

Matheron, however, is careful and fully aware that other options present themselves. What makes his presentation in *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants* particularly interesting is that the reader of the TTP, in his opinion, ultimately is confronted with a clear choice: we either accept that Spinoza's Christ had philosophical knowledge of the foundation of theology (leading us to embrace the full consequences of this position, viz. the full demonstrability of the tenets), or we must concede that Spinoza's Christ is a political pragmatist (teaching them salutary but philosophically unsound tenets of faith).<sup>186</sup> Matheron explores the first route. Our previous inquiries, however, reveal that the alternative already suggested by Matheron (i.e. Spinoza's Christ

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<sup>185</sup> Matheron tells us that obedience (understood as a love of God resulting from a sincere belief in the tenets of faith) will not necessarily lead to *amor dei intellectualis* (the salvation or beatitude discussed in the final part of the *Ethics*). However, he argues that under certain conditions this might actually be the case. First, for some (especially those with sufficient bodily and mental strength) 'L'amour passionnel de Dieu' will be a steppingstone towards actual freedom. For Matheron it is not inconceivable that obedience leads at least certain people towards *amor dei intellectualis* ("elle nous y prepare" [*Le Christ et le salut des Ignorants chez Spinoza*, 199]). Second, ideal political states facilitate the cultivation of individual freedom. For Matheron it is again not inconceivable that those who are yet unable to rouse themselves towards freedom might actually achieve this in an ideal political state. He formulates this as follows: "Mais si notre corps revivait une seconde fois? Et si, entre notre vie présente et la suivante, des sociétés parfaites s'étaient instaurées sur toute la surface de la Terre? Ceux qui, dès aujourd'hui, en dépit d'un environnement assez hostile, sont presque parvenus à la connaissance vraie de Dieu, n'iraient-ils pas beaucoup plus loin si une nouvelle chance leur était offerte dans des conditions plus favorable?" (Ibid., 227) In short: the claim that obedience *always* leads to salvation for Matheron presents itself as a logical possibility if we (1) embrace the possibility of successive bodily reincarnations throughout history, and (2) accept that each person's individual essence at least once will be (re)instantiated in a perfect society.

<sup>186</sup> He writes: "Si la religion qu'il prêcha aux masses n'était qu'une mystification politiquement utile, il n'a pu dépasser lui-même, y compris dans ses pensées les plus intimes, le niveau de l'utilitarisme politique: il ne s'est assigné pour but *suprême* que la sécurité de l'Etat à n'importe quel prix, non la béatitude véritable. Inversement, si son projet fondamental était vraiment de connaître et de faire connaître Dieu, il n'a rien pu de dire de faux sur Dieu. Ainsi notre problème prend-il sa forme définitive: les dogmes de la religion universelle sont-ils, non seulement utiles, mais vrais? Ou, ce qui revient au même, s'accordent-ils avec la doctrine de L'*Ethique*?" (*Le Christ et le salut des ignorants*, 97).

as consequentialist or, as I have called it, pragmatist) is viable and far less problematic than one might anticipate.

First, Spinoza (as indicated in the previous chapters) in both the TTP and his correspondence advances a reading that places primary emphasis on the utility – and not truthfulness – of the tenets of faith. This pragmatic approach, however, is perfectly capable of concluding a strong and coherent account of theological obedience; one that fully integrates Spinoza's reflections on moral psychology, and in particular his views on the passions and their potential use for sustaining civic concord. On this reading, it is precisely because of its reliance on powerful religious hopes and fears that the revealed divine law is able to support obedience and stimulate just and charitable behavior in the multitude. The Bible presents people with the exemplar of God as king or lawgiver; an image grounded in inadequate knowledge yet unrivaled with regard to its motivational efficiency in bringing about a love of justice and charity.

Second, the pragmatic approach provides a powerful rationale for Spinoza's particular depiction of Jesus in the TTP. After all, if Spinoza's true intention was to suggest the demonstrability of the foundation of theology, then it would have made more sense for him to fully identify Christ with the Maimonidean philosopher-prophet. Spinoza, as we have seen, does no such thing. However, by drawing attention to Christ's manifold use of parables and obscure language, something he could easily do by invoking similarities with the Maimonidean philosopher-prophet, Spinoza could still highlight the instrumental nature of revealed religion. Instead of presenting the people with eternal truths that would not be understood, Spinoza's Jesus fell back on a *modus operandi* that would be effective in teaching justice and loving-kindness. According to Spinoza's description, even Christ knew that obedience, not truth, is the primary objective of the prophetic undertaking.

Third, the pragmatic approach still does not require us to conceive Spinoza's Christ as a deceiver or impostor. On this reading, Christ's reliance on craft and parabolic language is in perfect agreement with Spinoza's broader conception of prophecy. This approach, moreover,

does not invalidate Spinoza's portrayal of Christ as moral exemplar. Insofar as Christ is a philosopher, he was a theological innovator who freed his audience from bondage to the old Mosaic law. Insofar as he is a prophet, he institutes the religious doctrine that benefited the people the most. In light of his twofold method of teaching, Spinoza's Christ still functions as an exemplar of *'justitia et caritas'* for both the faithful and the more philosophically inclined readers of Scripture. In sum, the pragmatic approach is sufficiently coherent to accommodate those aspects of Christ's persona that are uncontroversial in scholarship (viz. his role as moral exemplar and theological innovator), without sacrificing the more critical dimension of Spinoza's characterization.

Let me summarize our results in this chapter. We started by noting the remarkable similarities between the actions of the Maimonidean philosopher-prophet and Christ's *modus operandi* as portrayed in the TTP. Subsequently, we examined whether the model of Christ as philosopher-prophet defended in this chapter (viz. a moral exemplar who propagates justice and charity through both reason and imagination) could be maintained given Spinoza's critique of Maimonides in the TTP. We saw that such a characterization does not affect Spinoza's critique of the Maimonidean conception of prophecy as being both rational *and* imaginative. Spinoza's Christ receives his revelations in a completely conceptual manner. This, however, does not prevent him from relying on his imagination to accommodate his teaching to the understanding of the masses. We also saw that Spinoza's attribution to Christ of essential characteristics of the Maimonidean philosopher-prophet does not require us to question the separation between philosophy and theology so arduously defended in the TTP.<sup>187</sup> That is, Spinoza's claim that Christ adequately perceived the foundation of theology – but never demonstrated it – does not need to imply that Jesus, in Spinoza's opinion, actually had demonstrable knowledge of this tenet. I have argued that Spinoza's emphasis on Christ's use of obscure language and parables is meant primarily to highlight the radical instrumental view of religion present throughout his writings.

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<sup>187</sup> TTP 14.5; GIII 174: "to separate faith from Philosophy, which was the main purpose of this whole work".

Spinoza's Christ can still be labeled a philosopher-prophet in light of his two-fold method of teaching, not because his teachings are imaginative translations of philosophical insight. He embraces the teachings of his prophetic predecessors mainly due to their effectiveness in leading people towards justice and charity.

In the concluding chapter, I situate Spinoza's portrayal of Christ as philosopher-prophet within the overall framework of Spinoza's critique of revealed religion presented in the TTP.



## CHAPTER 8: SPINOZA ON 'CHRIST ACCORDING TO THE FLESH': JESUS AS PHILOSOPHER-PROPHET. PART FOUR: THE PROBLEM OF CHRIST

This chapter discusses the political ramifications of Spinoza's portrayal of Christ as philosopher-prophet. It argues that Spinoza's depiction of Christ's *modus operandi* – i.e. his dual method of teaching that relies both on reason and imagination to instill religious adherence – provides the basis for the disunity and multiplicity of confessions that has been haunting theology ever since the spreading of Christian doctrine by the Apostles. Although Spinoza explains the superstitious tangling up of theological issues with philosophical disputes primarily as an inevitable result of Christianity's universality and the implications this had for the way the Apostles presented their teachings, a careful reading of the text places Christ himself at the forefront of the debate. Whereas Spinoza's Jesus was careful enough not to rely on philosophical arguments while addressing the multitude, he did not demand the same level of scrutiny from his Apostles. Christ's followers not only fell back on highly charged imaginative language, they increasingly relied on speculative reasoning while addressing the multitude. I argue that Spinoza, by making the Christ of the TTP both sanctioner and exemplar for the way the Apostles spread their religious doctrine, situates the roots of Christianity's decay into superstitious discourse already within Christ's own teaching. For this reason, this chapter argues that the identification of the biblical Jesus of the TTP with a philosopher-prophet renders Spinoza's critique of the political inadequacy of the teachings of the Apostles, and their descendants, fully intelligible.

In a 1665 letter to Oldenburg, Spinoza expresses his motivations for writing the TTP. One main objective was to overcome the prejudices of theologians who violate Scripture's fundamental dogma of loving-kindness by advancing new, irrelevant, doctrines grounded in speculative thinking (Ep. 30, 844). Spinoza presents the TTP as a necessary corrective to the corruption of Christianity, particularly the violent quarrels caused by Christian theologians who use philosophy as a weapon (see, for instance, TTP preface §18; GIII 9). In order to safeguard both piety and the

freedom to philosophize, Spinoza maintains that the intellectual knowledge of God “does not in any way pertain to faith and to revealed religion” (TTP 13.24; GIII 171). Scripture only demands knowledge of those beliefs necessary for people to be able to obey God, the so called tenets of universal faith. With the exception of these dogmas, everyone is free to think what he wants: “as for the rest - what God, *or* that model of true life, is, whether he is fire, spirit, light, thought, etc. - that does not matter as far as faith is concerned” (TTP 14.30; GIII 178).

Accordingly, Spinoza’s undertaking in the TTP largely depends on his ability to convince readers that the various speculative teachings that concern the specific nature of God do not belong to Scripture’s core teaching. Indeed, Spinoza goes to great lengths to show that a proper analysis of the Old Testament reveals the necessity of distinguishing between prophetic revelations and speculative opinions that have nothing to do with Scripture’s central doctrine ‘to love God above all else and your neighbor as yourself’. For this reason, Spinoza’s decision to abstain from applying his historical method to the New Testament as well comes rather as a surprise.<sup>188</sup> After all, Spinoza is writing for a predominantly Christian audience. Furthermore, the Apostles were sent to teach the entire human race, including the philosophically educated. Consequently, it would seem pertinent for Spinoza to rigorously investigate whether the Apostles’ speculative claims can be dismissed in a similar manner. Spinoza, of course, would take the necessary steps to show that this is actually the case, yet his preference to avoid this topic should be kept in mind.

In order to show that the Apostolic letters equally contain many issues that are not intended to be philosophically compelling, Spinoza urges his readers to take into account the various styles of speeches they contain. He distinguishes between prophetic and non-prophetic phrases: whereas authoritative utterances such as ‘thus says God’ indicate that an Apostle is

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<sup>188</sup> He writes: “Now it would be time to examine the books of the New Testament in the same way. But because I hear that this has been done by men who are most learned both in the sciences and especially in the languages, because I do not have such an exact knowledge of the Greek language that I might dare to undertake this task, and finally, because we lack the original texts of the books written in the Hebrew language I prefer to refrain from this difficult business” (TTP 10.48; GIII 150-1).

conveying a revealed command, utterances that involve arguments only express the Apostle's personal opinion (ITP 11.2-3; GIII 151). Given the predominance of philosophical deductions and arguments, Spinoza concludes that the Apostles did not write their Letters "from revelation and a divine command, but only from their natural judgment" (ITP 11.8; GIII 153). Spinoza maintains that the Apostles should primarily be regarded as teachers rather than prophets. Their philosophical discourse is not authoritative; every reader has the freedom to find out for himself what sort of speculative foundation their moral teaching requires. However, given that the Apostles present teachings predominantly not grounded in divine revelation, the question arises why we should nonetheless grant them special authority. Spinoza provides the following answer:

We shall settle this question easily if we attend to the difference between the calling of the Apostles and that of the Old Testament Prophets. The latter were not called to preach and prophesy to all nations, but only to certain particular ones. Because of this they required an explicit and special command for each nation. But the Apostles were called to preach to absolutely everyone and to convert everyone to religion. So wherever they went, they were carrying out Christ's command. And it was not necessary for them to have the things they were to preach revealed to them before they went – not those disciples of Christ to whom he himself had said: *but when they hand you over, do not be anxious about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you shall say will be given to you in that hour etc.* (ITP 11.11; GIII 154).

Spinoza confirms the prophetic authority of the Apostles in reference to their personal experience of Christ, including his revelations and the miracles he performed. Spinoza claims that they "were able to infer and extract many things from the things they'd seen, the things they'd heard" (ITP 11.14; GIII 156). The Apostles were carrying out Christ's command, and received "the power to preach the story of Christ as prophets" (ITP 11.16; GIII 156). Spinoza does not deny that the Apostles themselves had specific revelations. However, when this was the case, they always preached these things orally and confirmed them with signs (ITP 11.12; GIII 155). The Apostles' speculative discourse in the Epistles, for this reason, can easily be distinguished from

the prophetic activities they performed either in the name of Christ or on their own behalf.

Importantly, the Apostles' recourse to philosophy still would pave the way for sectarian dispute. Contrary to Christ's 'ignorant' Jewish audience, the Apostles were called to preach to men living in cultures already acquainted with various forms of Greek philosophy. In order for them to more easily accept the Christian teaching, the Apostles had recourse to the 'false' philosophy of the Ancients. Each built Christ's moral doctrine on different speculative foundations, providing the basis for a multiplicity of confessions, schisms, and, ultimately, theological decay. A deplorable state of affairs that will continue to torment the Church until "religion is separated from philosophic speculations and reduced to those very few and very simple tenets Christ taught his followers" (TTP 11.22; GIII 158).

Now, passages like these suggest that Spinoza's Christ should not be held responsible for the corruption of Christianity. Indeed, according to Spinoza, Christ was careful enough to only teach the natural divine law to those capable of understanding it; he refrained from using philosophical terminology while addressing the multitude. This cannot be said of his Apostles: Christ's followers not only fell back on highly charged imaginative language while addressing the multitude, they disagreed fundamentally about their teacher's meaning. Paul, for instance, preached that we are saved by grace through faith, whereas James advocated a justification through works. In a similar vein, Spinoza tells Oldenburg that some of "the Evangelists themselves believed that the body of Christ rose again and ascended to heaven to sit at God's right hand," indicating primarily that "they could have been deceived, as was the case with other prophets" (Ep. 79, 953). Consequently, the TTP seems to target primarily Christ's theological successors for misunderstanding or misrepresenting Jesus' true intentions.

However, the TTP's apparent appraisal of Christ's simplified teaching is highly questionable given Spinoza's emphasis that the Apostles "wherever they went, ... were carrying out Christ's command" (TTP 11.11; GIII 154). It was Christ himself who sanctioned the actions of the Apostles by giving them the authority to teach and preach to absolutely everyone (and this

in a manner that suited the Apostles best at that time). Furthermore, they all grounded their teachings on the life and story of Christ, or, as Susan James puts it, “brought their interpretive skills to bear, not on a text, but on their immediate experience of Jesus” (*Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics. The Theologico-Political Treatise*, 181). Christ not only authorized the actions of the Apostles, he also functioned as an exemplar on how to propagate religion.

The implications of this reading become fully apparent when we take into account one of Spinoza’s rare, explicit descriptions of Christ’s strategy. At the end of chapter II, after having presented his theory of accommodation central to the TTP’s approach to Scripture, Spinoza writes:

We should maintain the same thing about the reasonings by which Christ convicted the Pharisees of stubbornness and ignorance, and exhorted his disciples to the true life: he accommodated his reasonings to the opinions and principles of each one. E.g., when he said to the Pharisees (Matthew 12:26), *if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then will his kingdom stand?*, he just wanted to convince the Pharisees from their own principles, not to teach that there are Devils, or that there is a kingdom of Devils. Likewise, when he said to his disciples (Matthew 18:10), *see that you do not disdain one of those little ones, for I say to you that in the heavens their Angels etc. [always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.]* For he just wanted to teach them not to be proud and not to disdain anyone, but not the rest of the things which are contained in his reasons, which he offers only to persuade his disciples better. (TTP 2.56; GIII 43).

According to Spinoza, Christ saw it fit to even appeal to Devils and Angels in order to persuade his disciples better. This is a thought with far reaching consequences. Indeed, Spinoza on various occasions considers the belief in devils, ghosts and spirits as the epitome of superstitious ignorance; “delusions of a sad and timid mind” (TTP preface 6; GIII 6) particularly useful for keeping people in awe. His most elaborate discussion of devils is found in the *Short Treatise*. Spinoza does not waste much time on the issue: “As, however, there is no necessity whatever why we should posit the existence of Devils, why then should they be posited? For we need not, like others, posit Devils in order to find [in them] the cause of Hatred, Envy, Wrath, and such-

like passions, since we have found this sufficiently, without such fictions” (ST, II.25, 99).<sup>189</sup>

Spinoza tells us that Christ’s reliance on imaginative language of this kind serves only a pragmatic function, and therefore should not be counted as belonging to Christianity’s core doctrine. However, Spinoza’s harsh criticism of the practice of theologians to control people’s emotional lives and the speculative justifications they employ for doing so, prevents us from simply dismissing the importance of such rhetorical devices. After all, the *modus operandi* of those theologians Spinoza so arduously attacks in the TTP comes dangerously close to those instrumental tactics employed by both Christ and his Apostles. For this reason, Spinoza’s hesitancy to fully examine the books of the New Testament seems motivated by other than merely linguistic reasons. Indeed, Spinoza himself seems to hint at this exact point when describing the actions of the Apostles:

There is no need to speak more fully about these matters. For if I had to enumerate all those Passages in Scripture which are written only *ad hominem*, or, according to someone’s power of understanding, and which cannot be defended as divine teaching without great prejudice to Philosophy, I would give up the brevity I desire. Let it suffice, therefore, to have touched on a few, universal things. The rest the curious reader may weigh for himself. (TTP 2.57; III/43-4).

The attention of the curious reader is heightened even more when confronted with Spinoza’s definition of the ‘anti-Christ’ in the TTP. For Spinoza, the anti-Christ is someone who advocates a form of theological discipline that no longer takes the doctrine of justice and charity as the only measure for piety and faith. By conflating essential with non-essential tenets, the anti-Christ blurs the true meaning of Scripture. He puts religion in service of doctrinal purity and persecutes those with dissenting opinions (TTP 14.19; GIII 176). Those who are truly led by the ‘spirit of Christ’, on the other hand, peacefully spread the message of justice and charity. They leave people free in their opinions, and through ‘brotherly advice’ and ‘good education’ strengthen their fellow man’s

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<sup>189</sup> In his correspondence with Hugo Boxel, Spinoza also takes up the issue of ghosts and spirits (see Ep. 51, 560).

inner religion (TTP 7.90; GIII 116). However, as we have just seen, the line between brotherly exhortation and superstitious embellishment is rather thin. Given that even Christ himself fell back on highly charged imaginative language, it is hardly surprising that many theologians would follow in his footsteps. After all, “men usually err most regarding religion, and are apt to compete greatly in inventing many things according to the differences in their mentality” (TTP 16.62; GIII 199). Similarly, the theological practice of accommodating Scripture to ‘Aristotelian and Platonic speculations’ is equally unsurprising. Spinoza even stresses that no one but Paul himself, Christ’s first lieutenant, philosophized more. If the Apostles grounded their teachings on their immediate experience of Christ, it is hardly surprising that they relied on both philosophic and imaginative language.

Consequently, as we mentioned before, Spinoza argues that the common people need to be instructed by stately appointed ministers of the Church in those biblical “narratives which are most able to move their hearts to obedience” (TTP 5.44; GIII 79). Although individuals should be left free to examine Scripture, the state must always intervene to steer things in the proper direction. Only when the state assumes full control of religion’s external practices can the doctrine of justice and loving-kindness fulfil its regulative function. Spinoza’s awareness that even Christ’s ‘simplified’ teaching can easily be misinterpreted, not to say politically abused, is highly indicative of the instability at the core of Christian doctrine. By reminding his philosophical readers of Christ’s use of parables and obscure language, Spinoza suggests that Christ’s teaching itself sows the seed of superstitious discord characterizing Christianity ever since its dispersion. The suspicion many theologians had concerning Spinoza’s ‘concealed’ depiction of Christ appears far from ungrounded.

## CONCLUSION

God plays a central role in Spinoza's philosophical system. Although this is far from unusual in early modern thought, his particular account of what God is differs quite markedly from standard accounts. Spinoza's God, as we have seen, is no transcendent agent separate from creation, but the immanent cause of all things. The traditional view of God as the ultimate father-lawgiver associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition is reduced, at least philosophically, to a function of the imagination.

However, Spinoza's philosophical assessment of revealed religion forms only a part of his overall evaluation of the religious phenomenon. What makes Spinoza such a captivating author is that his powerful rejection of teleological thinking, anthropomorphism, and miracles is accompanied by an equally forceful appraisal of revealed religion as a valuable, even indispensable, tool of morality. Although Spinoza undercuts the common understanding of prophecy as a privileged and supernatural form of cognition, he sees no reason to question the moral superiority of the prophets, who, in Spinoza's opinion, never taught in bath faith when they claimed that obedience alone is sufficient for salvation (TTP 15.34; GIII 186). Furthermore, although Spinoza's analysis of Scripture reduces the Bible to a historical, i.e. natural, product of literature – a work of human industry subject to historical manipulation and corruption – this still did not deter him from attributing to Scripture an unprecedented source of spiritual wellbeing and comfort. If it weren't for Scripture, Spinoza writes, "we would doubt nearly everyone's salvation" (TTP 15.45; GIII 188).

Confronted with these seemingly irreconcilable views, it is not surprising that many of Spinoza's readers ended up questioning his religious sincerity. A significant number (if not most) of his Dutch contemporaries concluded that Spinoza's professed loyalty to Scripture stems merely from rhetorical and political considerations. We encountered this attitude in, for instance, Van Velthuisen's commentary on the TTP, who took it for granted that Spinoza's true intention



in the TTP was teaching atheism by means of ‘hidden and disguised’ arguments.<sup>190</sup> The intimated charge that Spinoza strategically uses equivocation and double language in order to hide his real, anti-religious position would resurface repeatedly, in various guises, over the years. Leibniz, for instance, charged Spinoza with irony (see Curley, ‘Homo Audax’) while others attributed to Benedictus nothing less than deception and mendacity.<sup>191</sup>

Still others have been less critical. Spinoza’s sympathetic reflections on Christ and Christianity, it is argued, carry more weight than his critical remarks on the subject; they should be taken at face value. Intriguingly, Spinoza’s personal friend Jarig Jelles, in the preface to Spinoza’s posthumous works, saw it fit to present our thinker as a truly Christian philosopher.<sup>192</sup> An approach that recently has been revitalized, quite forcefully for that matter, by Graeme Hunter: Spinoza’s heretical views should be seen as internal to protestant Christianity and by no means reveal the hand of an author hostile to Christianity. On the contrary, Spinoza was a (practicing) radical protestant; the teachings of the *Ethics* are consistent with, and heavily influenced by, the New Testament. Hunter goes so far as to attribute to Spinoza a belief in the Divinity of Christ, divine justice and grace (see his *Radical Protestantism in Spinoza’s Thought*).

Although I risk simplifying a bit, both approaches (situated arguably at the extremes of the interpretative spectrum) reflect competing answers to one essential question latent in nearly the whole of Spinoza’s work: what to do with Spinoza’s claim that alongside the beatitude attainable for those capable of true philosophy, an alternative salvation exist. This alternative, as

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<sup>190</sup> Van Vethuysen was not alone in this assessment. Melchior, Van Mansvelt, Blyenbergh, and Bredenburg – to name but a few – expressed similar worries. See Van Bunge, ‘On the Early Dutch Reception of the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus’.

<sup>191</sup> I am of course thinking of Leo Strauss’s commentaries on the TTP (e.g. *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* and ‘How to Study Spinoza’s “Theologico-Political Treatise”’). A similar attitude is found in Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism*, 282. Others have accepted Strauss’s basic point on esoteric writing, while providing a somewhat more nuanced approach to the matter. Yovel, for instance, argues that the practice of writing with multiple meanings should be situated within the Marrano culture of Amsterdam Jewry in which Spinoza was formed. On his reading, Spinoza should not be charged with mendacity. By ‘translating’ traditional terms into his philosophical discourse, Spinoza could reach the multitude in the most effective way (see his *The Marrano of Reason*).

<sup>192</sup> E.g. Hubbeling, ‘Spinozism and Spinozistic studies in the Netherlands’, 387 and Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza*, 215. For a critical edition of Jelles’ preface, see Akkerman en Hubbeling, ‘The Preface to Spinoza’s Posthumous Works, 1677, and its Author Jarig Jelles (c. 1619/20-1683)’.

we have seen, is the path of revelation and faith. Whereas the first group reduces this talk of an alternative route to being merely a rhetorical device intended to appease the predominantly religious (and hostile) environment in which Spinoza lived and worked, the second group sees no reason to question it. That is, they maintain that philosophy (associated with the natural light) and Scripture (associated with imagination and the prophetic light) are presented as alternative ways of knowing the same truths.<sup>193</sup>

In what follows, I briefly describe some of the main findings of this dissertation in relation to the issue just mentioned. I argue that interpretations that either aggrandize Spinoza's positive remarks concerning revealed religion or overemphasize the critical aspect of his assessment both detract from the nuance and acuteness so central to Spinoza's approach. His claim that reason and revelation both provide access to salvation does not rest on any contradiction (multiple paths to salvation are open), nor does it entail that the truth of reason is the same as the truth of faith (the anthropomorphic conception of God remains incompatible with the Spinozistic conception of the deity). As will be shown next, a balanced assessment of Spinoza's position regarding revealed religion starts by looking at the fundamental similarities between a life of reason and a life of faith, as well as their ultimate point of departure.

I. As we have seen in Chapter 4, Spinoza's *Ethics* traces the arduous path to blessedness offered by intuition. Insofar as we achieve knowledge of essences of individual things, Spinoza tells us, our mind conceives of its own eternity, and is affected with perfect joy and an eternal love towards the divine. By increasing our knowledge of God – “The more we understand singular things, the more we understand God” (EVp24) – we realize consciousness of ourselves, of God, and of things, by certain necessity (EVp42s). We become aware of what we truly are – modes of

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<sup>193</sup> Jelles, for instance, writes: “Dat wijders ook dit, namentlijk, naar vermogen te trachten de waarheit van 't geen, dat ter zaligheid geweten en gekent moet worden, te verstaan, of ('t welk het zelfde is) daar af zuiver verstandelijke bevattingen te verkrijgen, en naar dit verstaan, of naar deze bevattingen, dat is, naar de voorspelling van 't verstant te leven, en uit het verstant te werken, niet tegen de heilige Schrift, noch tegen de gronden van de Christelijke Godsdienst strijd; ('t welk van veel geloofd word, die alleenlijk door de letter, of door de schrift, en niet door de geest, of door 't verstant onderwezen en geleid worden) maar in tegendeel met beide overeenkoomt” (*De Nagelate Schriften*, Voorreeden, 15-6).

the one infinite substance – and experience the highest possible contentment of mind (EVp27dem), one arising from awareness of our power of understanding (EIVp52dem).

The fact that intuitive knowledge always involves an understanding of ourselves as involved in God (EVp29s) – a contemplative experience of power and self-transcendence in which we feel part of eternal substance – has led some commentators to associate Spinoza’s third kind of knowledge with “a kind of ‘religious’ experience”.<sup>194</sup> However, for many of Spinoza’s more orthodox readers (think of, for instance, Oldenburg in Ep. 74), this would be a far from reassuring thought. Spinoza’s system of immanent causality gives rise to a radical determinism or, what (to them) amounts to the same thing, fatalism and the complete destruction of the possibility of morality and religion; a worry that is clearly not unwarranted from a traditional religious perspective. After all, as De Dijn points out, within the experience of being *in* God associated with Spinozistic intuition “we come to know in an *objective* way that everything is radically determined by God: everything is a necessary manifestation of the essence of the divine Substance or Nature, which does not act with any end in view” (Ibid).

Importantly, Spinoza himself had little difficulty with the concern that in a deterministic universe conventional morality and religion are undermined. As Spinoza tells us, the worry expressed by theologians that determinism completely undercuts human responsibility (making law, religion, and the systems of reward and punishment on which they support obsolete) is grounded in misunderstanding. His reply to Oldenburg is worth quoting again:

moral precepts, whether or not they receive from God himself the form of command or law, are nonetheless divine and salutary, and whether the good that follows from virtue and the divine love is bestowed on us by God as judge, or whether it emanates from the necessity of the divine nature, it will not on that account be more or less desirable, just as on the other hand the evils that follow from wicked deeds and passions are not less to be feared because they necessarily follow from them. And finally, whether we do what we do necessarily or contingently, we are still led by hope and fear” (Ep. 75, 945).

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<sup>194</sup> De Dijn, ‘Wisdom and theoretical knowledge in Spinoza’, 151; De Dijn, *Spinoza: The Way to Wisdom*, 260. See also, for instance, Yovel, *The Adventures of Immanence*, 142.

Spinoza emphasizes that the complete determinateness of things does not prevent us from differentiating between actions that generate good and actions that generate bad consequences. Moral precepts remain extremely valuable, whether or not one conceives these precepts as decreed by a divine lawgiver or as dictates of reason. This corresponds to an important remark Spinoza makes in the TTP: “we are completely ignorant of the order and connection of things itself, i.e., of how things are really ordered and connected. So for practical purposes it is better, indeed necessary, to consider things as possible” (TTP 4.4, GIII 58). Moral precepts are effective means to remediate the damaging effects of our limited knowledge of nature. This applies as much to the man of faith as to the philosopher. Spinoza’s remarks are particularly relevant to our present discussion.

First, to claim that Spinoza is an author fundamentally opposed to revealed religion is clearly a willful misreading of his project. Spinoza presents the religious experience as a natural phenomenon grounded in human psychology. It relates to our universal and continuous search for meaning, to our hopes and fears as finite beings, and our need to construct action-guiding narratives that help define ourselves both as individuals and as groups (Chapter 4). Faith provides insight into the nature of the human mind (not to mention the nature of political organization), it should be understood rather than despised or mocked. At any rate, Spinoza’s writings resists either a straightforward endorsement or a plain condemnation of revealed religion. Its precepts are desirable insofar as they are instruments of justice and loving-kindness; they are undesirable insofar as they become a source of social and political discord (Chapter 3).

Second, the fact that revealed religion relies substantially on the imagination does not in itself constitute a decisive epistemological argument in favor of the Spinozan *bios philosophicos* over the religious life. As we have seen, religion’s reliance on imaginative structures to steer the daily conduct of its adherents by no means is exclusive to theology. Even for the wisest Spinozist philosopher there is a substantial need for an intervention at the level of the imagination. And while I am not the first to emphasize the constructive role of the imagination in Spinoza’s

thought<sup>195</sup>, our reflections in Chapter 1 nonetheless contribute to our understanding of the issue. So long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, philosophers (similar to the faithful) must rely on *dogmata* and rules of living for everyday guidance and conduct. Spinoza's commentaries on the use of (Baconian) Civil History bring out this point quite forcefully. Not only should we cultivate and practice imaginary techniques for self-awareness and self-control, we must increasingly acquaint ourselves with behavioral knowledge, i.e. knowledge of human mores and characters.

Third, Spinoza's concept of the spirit of Christ provides an additional, powerful rationale for not disregarding the similarities between a life of reason and a life of faith. As we have seen, philosophy (reason) and theology (faith) converge on the mantra 'love God and your neighbor'. However, the comparison does not end here. In addition to the fact that both enterprises project forceful exemplars and modes of living for achieving peace of mind and self-contentment, their successful application in both cases is a matter of sustained commitment and strenuous daily labor. To phrase it somewhat differently: the attainment of piety, however conceived, always is the result of *God's internal aid*. That is, the practice of justice and loving-kindness depends chiefly on man's inner nature alone, it is a fulfilment of a desire towards the good, one that requires perseverance and determination. And while this might not carry much value to some, it is a factor worth considering. Spinoza found it relevant enough to supplement his defense of the separation of the domains of philosophy and theology (emphasizing their different foundations and goals) with an argument in favor of a less stringent approach to the matter. Spinoza's concept of the spirit of Christ celebrates the lives of all those who exercise loving-kindness, justice and righteousness on earth (whatever their background knowledge). As such, 'the spirit of Christ' presents an interestingly overlooked argument for toleration in Spinoza studies, one undoubtedly relevant to both 'sceptic' theologians and 'dogmatic' philosophers.

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<sup>195</sup> E.g. Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*; Klein, 'Dreaming with open eyes: Cartesian dreams, Spinozan analyses'; James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics*; Rosenthal, 'Spinoza and the philosophy of history'.

Fourth, the fact that the central doctrine of revealed religion put forward in the TTP – i.e. salvation requires love of God and one’s neighbor – accords with the precepts of reason demonstrated in Part 4 of the *Ethics*, allows Spinoza to speak coherently of distinct and multiple paths to salvation. However, the superiority of rational insight leading to salvation remains indisputable. Our inquiries have shown that faith (conceived here as acting just through pious obedience) falls short of Spinozistic beatitude in the following way: although conduct prompted by faithful obedience may coincide with the right behavior that supervenes upon the true knowledge of God, this outcome is far from guaranteed. As we have seen, passion-based exemplars (like the image of God as lawgiver) often enhance rather than subdue irrational beliefs and superstitious behavior. The fact that revealed religion uses men’s most pervasive existential hopes and fears for instilling obedience contributes to its effectiveness, but simultaneously makes it vulnerable to corruption and abuse (the source of its success constitutes its very weakness or instability). In short, biblical religion for Spinoza only acquires ‘wisdom of doctrine’ insofar as its practitioners are capable of systematically distinguishing between the essential (justice and loving-kindness) and the ancillary. Spinoza, however, has little confidence in this assumption: pastors of the Church, appointed by the state, must provide the necessary guidance.

Additionally, we have seen that only adequate knowledge will allow us to attain a truly eternal, intuitive cognition of ourselves, the world, and our place in it. Whereas a life of pious obedience suffices for salvation, only an intellectual love of God can bring about the highest flourishing or *summae beatitudines* (e.g. EII, preface). As Spinoza puts it, the true philosopher is “more blessed” than the true believer “because in addition to true [moral] opinions, he [also] has a clear and distinct conception [of God]” (TTP 5.40; GIII 78). Salvation, Spinoza suggests, comes in degrees.<sup>196</sup> While the last word has not been said on this subject, our inquiries convey the impression that the salvific scope of revealed religion does not extend into the perfect joy that accompanies pure contemplation. This active affect, Spinoza tells us, is essential for restraining

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<sup>196</sup> I am definitely not the first to come to this tentative conclusion. See, for instance, Steinberg, ‘Spinoza’s curious defense of toleration’, 216, n. 32 and Marshall, *The Spiritual Automaton*, 220.

our passions. That is, only *amor Dei intellectualis* provides the fullest protection against our lusts and ‘evil’ affects. As Spinoza puts it in the last proposition of the *Ethics*, “no one enjoys [the highest] blessedness because he has restrained the affects. Instead, the power to restrain lusts arises from [the highest] blessedness itself” (EVp42dem).

II. The fact that Spinoza identifies various paths to salvation (and degrees of salvation), does not imply that they constitute different routes to one and the same truth. While there are multiple roads to salvation, only the philosophical way of life portrayed in the *Ethics* is fully grounded in an adequate conception of God or Nature. I have argued that Spinoza embraces a life of faith as a viable alternative to the *bios philosophicos* mainly because of the former’s efficacy in bringing about justice and loving-kindness. Scripture presents people with the exemplar of God as lawgiver, an image grounded in inadequate knowledge yet unrivaled with regard to its motivational efficiency in bringing about a desire for justice and charity. The reason why for Spinoza other historical narratives and the action-guiding exemplars they contain, provided they successfully instill justice and loving-kindness, also qualify as salvific tools can be explained precisely in light of this consequentialist approach.

I do not deny that Spinoza’s revised version of revealed religion, centred around a pious belief in seven tenets of faith, does not add some elements of rationality to religious piety. Indeed, compared to the Mosaic law, the universal religion put forward in the TTP clearly is less exclusivist. There are, moreover, additional elements that suggest an effort on Spinoza’s behalf to present his readers with a conception of faith more agreeable to a philosophical mind. Susan James, for instance, has argued that Spinoza’s tenets are intended to invoke a ‘confidence-inspiring’ conception of God. Indeed, Spinoza considers devotion towards God as the highest achievement for the faithful (see tenet II). In the *Ethics*, he defines devotion as ‘love joined to wonder’. Spinoza distinguishes devotion from consternation, i.e. wonder aroused by an object of fear. Someone who is devoted to God, therefore, is someone who is in awe of a deity which he

loves, and not fears. Furthermore, the tenets make no mention of heaven or hell. A deity who does not invoke the prospect of hell in case of disobedience can indeed be seen as more confidence-inspiring than one who does. Fear of hell, Spinoza tells us, “is the single cause of superstition” (Ep. 76). Finally, Spinoza’s lawgiving God pardons the sins of those who repent. Previous transgressions do not rule out salvation in case of repentance, undoubtedly a confidence-inspiring thought.

However, the *Ethics* teaches us that “there is neither hope without fear, nor fear without hope” (EIII def. affects XIII). Even when we accept a reading of the tenets which emphasizes the hope these tenets invoke, this automatically gives rise to a reading that reinforces the fear that goes along with it. I have argued that for Spinoza theological obedience mainly is characterized by its advantageous use of the ductility of the multitude. By working on their hopes and fears, the biblical image of God as lawgiver stimulates people to act in accordance with their supposed interests. On this reading, fear of punishment and hope for reward remain essential to Spinoza’s definition of faith; the biblical image of God requires these affects to fulfill its function. And while Spinoza’s ingenuity, as we have seen, lies in his distinction between a constructive and destructive use of hope and fear, it is precisely this reliance on passive affects that renders religious faith unstable and, ultimately, philosophically suspect. Seen from the perspective of reason, there is, after all, nothing confidence-inspiring in the tenets of faith. Therefore I have argued, *pace* authors like Matheron, that the biblically-based analysis of religion presented in the TTP cannot be seen as a re-articulation of a set of philosophical conclusions Spinoza defends in the *Ethics*. Philosophy and faith offer distinct access points to salvation; they should, however, not be seen as different expressions of one truth. In the end, all efforts to completely bridge the gap between a non-anthropomorphic and anthropomorphic conception of the deity are in vain.

III. I have argued that Spinoza’s portrayal of ‘Christ according to the flesh’ provides additional support for the pragmatic reading of revealed religion presented here. While it remains difficult,



perhaps even impossible given the available data, to determine the precise extent of philosophical knowledge available to Spinoza's Christ, his reliance on obscure language and parables while addressing the multitude leaves less room for doubt. The fact that my reading turns Spinoza's Christ into a consequentialist who values effectiveness over truth might be seen as playing into the hands of those that attribute to Spinoza an intentionally hidden doctrine, one containing or at least suggesting a wholesale repudiation of the very pillars of revealed religion. I see no contradictions at work here. While Spinoza's attribution to Jesus of an unprecedented understanding of the foundation of theology remains remarkable, it still does not need to suggest any supernatural knowledge on behalf of Spinoza's Jesus. If Spinoza is consistent in this matter, then the foundation of Strauss' thesis (at least with regard to Christ) collapses. Of course, even if we put aside the question of 'deliberate contradictions' we still cannot deny that Spinoza's depiction of Christ is characterized by a high level of obscurity, even concealment. Indeed, our analyses have required a lot of interpretative work and 'reading between the lines'. However, while this clearly indicates some level of cautiousness on behalf of Spinoza, this should not be seen as a confirmation of esoterism. On the contrary, Spinoza's depiction of revealed religion lays open, and quite forcefully for that matter, the very machinery of faith. Treating the religious mindset 'as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies', the TTP lines out the essential building blocks required for obedience (i.e. the seven tenets of faith) as well as the source of its undoing or demise (i.e. the violation of these dogmas in the name of nonessential secondary ones). Rather than undermining revealed religion, Spinoza presents his readers with the tools for sustaining it in a productive and societally useful manner. This, I believe, is also the lesson to be taken from Spinoza's presentation of 'Christ according to the flesh'. While it would be a crucial mistake to disregard Spinoza's pious affirmation of Christ's role as a moral exemplar, it would be equally foolish to neglect its critical upshot. After all, only by visiting the iniquities of the father do the sins of the children fully reveal themselves.

## SUMMARY

The main purpose of this dissertation is to provide an assessment of piety, religious prophecy and morality more generally in Spinoza's thought through an examination of themes and topics that have remained controversial, or at least underexplored, in Spinoza studies. Specifically, it discusses how Spinoza's Christology provides a unique angle for approaching his moral and theological-political thinking, and incorporates a study of neglected 'English' influences and debates, most notably Baconianism and Quakerism.

The thesis consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1 argues that practical and imaginary techniques form an integral part of a life dedicated to the cultivation of reason as portrayed by Spinoza. Specifically, it shows that civil history forms an integral part of Spinoza's reflections on provisional morality. Spinoza, following Bacon, holds that conduct of practical affairs is particularly improved when those so engaged acquire historical knowledge of the human condition and apply it. Both authors place special emphasis on a history of men's characters, actions, and vices as providing the basis for concrete, directly applicable moral and civil precepts.

Chapter 2 examines the relevance of Bacon to the development of Spinoza's views on biblical hermeneutics. It shows that Spinoza's application of the Baconian *ars historica* to Scripture provides the framework from which to approach some of the most bewildering questions that arise in the context of Spinoza's views on hermeneutics. Specifically, I argue that both Spinoza's radical rejection in the *Treatise* of all appeals to supernatural inspiration, and his conspicuous revision of biblical miracles – as having natural rather than supernatural causal explanations – are best understood in light of Bacon's discussion of ancient historical texts and the difficulties related to their transmission and interpretation.

Chapter 3 applies Spinoza's analysis of Scripture and biblical piety to the religious beliefs of the early Quakers. I argue that an examination of Spinoza's concept of piety and religious prophecy in light of the early Quaker phenomenon is particularly useful in bringing attention to

the Spinozistic distinction between a *philosophical* and *theologico-political* assessment of divine revelation. I show that Spinoza's metaphysical rejection of anthropomorphism and teleological thinking should never be invoked against inner appeals to revelation and inspiration made by religious individuals. Whatever enthusiastic claims are made, people should only be restrained insofar as their opinions give rise to practices that endanger or undermine socio-political stability.

The remaining chapters are devoted to Spinoza's discussion of Christ. Chapter 4 argues that Spinoza identifies the spirit of Christ (*Christus secundum Spiritum*) with, foremost, a desire for just and charitable behavior; an inclination towards brotherly love found in men of all religious and non-religious denominations. What ties together the ethical endeavors of all those devoting themselves to justice and loving-kindness – allowing Spinoza to subsume them under one comprehensive category – is not the content of their knowledge, but a mutual reliance on action-guiding exemplars and, importantly, a shared commitment in overcoming the various stumbling-blocks that daily obstruct its realization.

Chapters 5-8 deal with Spinoza's treatment of Jesus or Christ 'according to the flesh' (*Christus secundum carnem*). The main argument developed throughout these chapters is that Spinoza's Jesus presents himself as a philosopher-prophet. In order to lead both philosophers and non-philosophers to the perfection and salvation available to them, Spinoza's Jesus develops a two-fold method of teaching adjusted to the intellectual abilities and affective sensibilities of his audience: when confronted with an uneducated multitude he teaches his revelations obscurely through parables, yet speaking to those who are capable of knowing he teaches in terms of eternal truths. I argue that it is this holistic perspective of Christ – i.e. his role as both philosophical instructor and prophetic teacher – that uniquely qualifies him as Spinoza's version of the philosopher-prophet. Each chapter examines various implications of this reading.

Chapter 5 argues that Spinoza's depiction of Christ as philosopher-prophet is meant to highlight the profoundly instrumental nature of revealed religion. Instead of presenting the non-philosophical multitude with eternal truths that would not be understood, Spinoza's Jesus chose

an alternative method of teaching that would be successful in encouraging justice and loving-kindness. The Christ of the TTP presents himself as a consequentialist who not only tailors his message to his specific audience but ultimately presents them philosophically contradictory teachings. For Spinoza's Jesus, the philosophical inadequacy of the anthropomorphic image of God is secondary to the positive moral effect it generates.

Chapter 6 shows that Christ's *modus operandi* towards the multitude accords perfectly with Spinoza's conception of religious prophecy set forward in the TTP. For Spinoza, obedience is the primary objective of Scripture, not truth. The vocation of the prophet was to promote a lifestyle that takes God as an example, a lifestyle devoted to loving-kindness and justice. By relying on the image of God as lawgiver Spinoza's Jesus could successfully accomplish this goal. Spinoza's Christ presents people with philosophically unsound though salutary tenets of faith, and therefore should be considered a faithful messenger of God..

Chapter 7 considers whether the model of Christ as philosopher-prophet can be maintained given Spinoza's critique of Maimonides in the TTP. I argue that Spinoza's Christ should not be mistaken for a *Maimonidean* philosopher-prophet: his teachings towards the masses are not derived from reason via a translation of philosophical insight into imaginative language. Spinoza's Jesus instructs non-philosophers by means of parables and imaginative language mainly due to their effectiveness in leading people towards justice and charity.

Chapter 8 discusses the political ramifications of Spinoza's portrayal of Christ as philosopher-prophet. I argue that Spinoza identifies Christ's reliance on both reason and imagination to instill religious adherence as the cause of the fragmentation and disunity that has characterized theology since its earliest dispersion. Although Spinoza at first sight puts forward Christianity's universal nature as the cause of the superstitious obfuscation of theology and philosophical reasoning by the Apostles, a careful reading shows that, in fact, Christ is the central figure in this issue. I argue that Spinoza, by making the Christ of the TTP both sanctioner and

exemplar for the way the Apostles spread their religious doctrine, situates the roots of Christianity's decay into superstitious discourse already within Christ's own teaching.

## SAMENVATTING

Deze dissertatie analyseert vroomheid, religieuze profetie en moraliteit in het denken van Spinoza. Dit gebeurt door middel van een grondige beschouwing van thema's en onderwerpen die controversieel of op zijn minst onderbelicht zijn gebleven in Spinoza-onderzoek. Meer specifiek bespreekt ik hoe Spinoza's Christologie een unieke invalshoek biedt om zijn morele en theologisch-politieke denken te benaderen en geef ik een analyse van ondergewaardeerde 'Engelse' invloeden en debatten, met name baconianisme en quakerisme.

Dit proefschrift bestaat uit 8 hoofdstukken. Hoofdstuk 1 stelt dat praktische en imaginaire technieken een integraal deel uitmaken van een leven volgens de rede zoals uiteengezet door Spinoza. Specifiek toon ik aan dat 'civil history' een inherent onderdeel is van Spinoza's beschouwingen over provisionele moraal. Spinoza, in navolging van Bacon, poneert dat het dagdagelijkse handelen verbetert wanneer individuen historische kennis vergaren van de menselijke conditie en die toepassen. Beide auteurs benadrukken het belang van een geschiedenis van menselijke karakters, handelingen en ondeugden als basis voor concrete, direct toepasbare morele en civiele voorschriften.

Hoofdstuk 2 onderzoekt de relevantie van Bacon voor de ontwikkeling van Spinoza's visie op Bijbelse hermeneutiek. Ik toon aan dat Spinoza's toepassing van de baconiaanse *ars historica* op de Bijbel het interpretatiekader vormt voor sommige van de meest ophefmakende vragen die bovendrijven in de context van Spinoza's visie op hermeneutiek. Specifiek beargumenteer ik dat zowel Spinoza's radicale verwerping van bovennatuurlijke inspiratie als zijn beruchte herziening van Bijbelse mirakels – die natuurlijke eerder dan bovennatuurlijke causale verklaringen hebben – het best begrepen kunnen worden in het licht van Bacons bespreking van historische teksten en de moeilijkheden die gepaard gaan met hun transmissie en interpretatie.

Hoofdstuk 3 past Spinoza's analyse van de Bijbel en Bijbelse vroomheid toe op de religieuze overtuigingen van de vroege quakers. Ik stel dat een onderzoek van Spinoza's concept

van vroomheid en religieuze profetie in het licht van het quakergedachtegoed uiterst bruikbaar is om het spinozistische onderscheid tussen een *filosofische* en *theologisch-politieke* benadering en beoordeling van goddelijke openbaring onder de aandacht te brengen. Ik toon aan dat Spinoza's metafysische verwerping van voorzienigheid, antropomorfisme en teleologisch denken nooit ingeroepen mag worden tegen innerlijke aanspraken van religieuze individuen op openbaring en inspiratie. Mensen mogen enkel beteugeld worden in zoverre hun opinies (hoe waanzinnig ook) effectief aanleiding geven tot praktijken die de socio-politieke stabiliteit ondermijnen.

De hiernavolgende hoofdstukken bespreken Spinoza's behandeling van Christus. Hoofdstuk 4 stelt dat Spinoza de geest van Christus (*Christus secundum Spiritum*) bovenal identificeert met een verlangen naar rechtvaardigheid en naastenliefde, een inclinatie tot broederliefde die teruggevonden kan worden bij aanhangers van alle religieuze en niet-religieuze strekkingen. Wat de ethische projecten van allen die zich wijden aan rechtvaardigheid en naastenliefde verbindt – en Spinoza toelaat hen in één allesomvattende categorie onder te brengen – is niet zozeer de inhoud van hun kennis maar een gedeelde afhankelijkheid van gedragssturende exemplars en, bovenal, een gedeelde vastberadenheid in het trotseren van de diverse obstakels die deze praktijk dagelijks in de weg staan.

Hoofdstukken 5 tot 8 behandelen Spinoza's presentatie van Jezus of Christus 'naar het vlees' (*Christus secundum carnem*). Het hoofdargument dat doorheen deze hoofdstukken uiteengezet wordt is dat Spinoza's Jezus zich presenteert als Spinoza's versie van de filosoof-profeet. Om zowel filosofen als niet-filosofen naar de voor hen bereikbare perfectie en zaligheid te leiden, ontwikkelt Spinoza's Jezus een tweevoudige methode van onderricht aangepast aan de intellectuele en affectieve vermogens van zijn toehoorders: geconfronteerd met een koppige en ongecultiveerde massa onderwijst hij zijn openbaringen doorheen parabels en obscure taal; wanneer hij degenen toespreekt die in staat zijn tot weten, onderricht hij hen in de vorm van eeuwige waarheden. Ik stel dat het deze holistische benadering van Christus is – zijn rol als zowel filosofische instructeur als profetische leraar – die hem op unieke wijze kwalificeert als Spinoza's

versie van de filosoof-profeet. Ieder hoofdstuk onderzoekt op zijn beurt verschillende implicaties van deze interpretatie.

Hoofdstuk 5 stelt dat Spinoza's karakterisering van Christus als filosoof-profeet bedoeld is om de fundamentele instrumentele natuur van geopenbaarde religie zoals uiteengezet in de TTP te benadrukken. In de plaats van de niet-filosofische menigte eeuwige waarheden voor te schotelen die niet begrepen zouden worden, kiest Spinoza's Jezus een alternatieve onderrichtsmethode die rechtvaardigheid en naastenliefde kan aanwakkeren. De Christus van de TTP wordt voorgesteld als een consequentialist die niet alleen zijn boodschap aanpast aan zijn specifieke publiek, maar hen uiteindelijk zelfs filosofisch tegenstrijdige leerstellingen presenteert. Voor Spinoza's Jezus is de filosofische ontoereikendheid van het antropomorfe godsbeeld secundair aan het positieve morele effect dat ze doorgaans genereert.

Hoofdstuk 6 toont aan dat Christus' *modus operandi* tegenover de massa perfect overeenkomt met Spinoza's begrip van religieuze profetie zoals uiteengezet in de TTP. Voor Spinoza is gehoorzaamheid het primaire streefdoel van de Bijbel en niet waarheid. De roeping van de profeten bestaat in het promoten van een leven dat God als voorbeeld neemt, een leven gericht op naastenliefde en rechtvaardigheid. Door op het beeld van God als wetgever te steunen kon Spinoza's Jezus dit doel realiseren. Spinoza's Christus presenteert het volk filosofisch inadequate maar niettemin zaligmakende leerstellingen en moet dus gezien worden als een waarachtige boodschapper van God.

Hoofdstuk 7 gaat na in hoeverre de karakterisering van Christus als filosoof-profeet standhoudt in het licht van Spinoza's kritiek op Maimonides in de TTP. Ik stel dat Spinoza's Christus niet gezien mag worden als een *maimonideaanse* filosoof-profeet: zijn leerstellingen ten aanzien van de massa kunnen niet gezien worden als (ge vulgariseerde) vertalingen of herwerkingen van filosofische kennis in imaginaire termen. Spinoza's Jezus instrueert niet-filosofen door middel van parabels en beeldrijke taal voornamelijk omwille van hun effectiviteit in het leiden van mensen naar rechtvaardigheid en naastenliefde.



Hoofdstuk 8 behandelt de politieke implicaties van Spinoza's karakterisering van Christus als filosoof-profeet. Ik stel dat Spinoza Christus' gebruik van zowel de rede als de verbeelding om religieuze toewijding te genereren identificeert als de oorzaak van de fragmentatie en verdeeldheid die de theologie karakteriseert sinds haar vroegste verspreiding. Hoewel Spinoza de universaliteit van het christendom naar voor lijkt te schuiven als primaire oorzaak van de contaminatie en vertroebeling van theologie met filosofische speculatie bij de apostelen, toont een grondige lezing dat Christus de centrale figuur is in deze kwestie. Ik toon aan dat Spinoza, door Christus zowel tot opdrachtgever als exemplar te maken voor de wijze waarop de apostelen hun religieuze doctrine verspreidden, de wortels van de degeneratie van het christendom reeds in Christus' eigen leer situeert.

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